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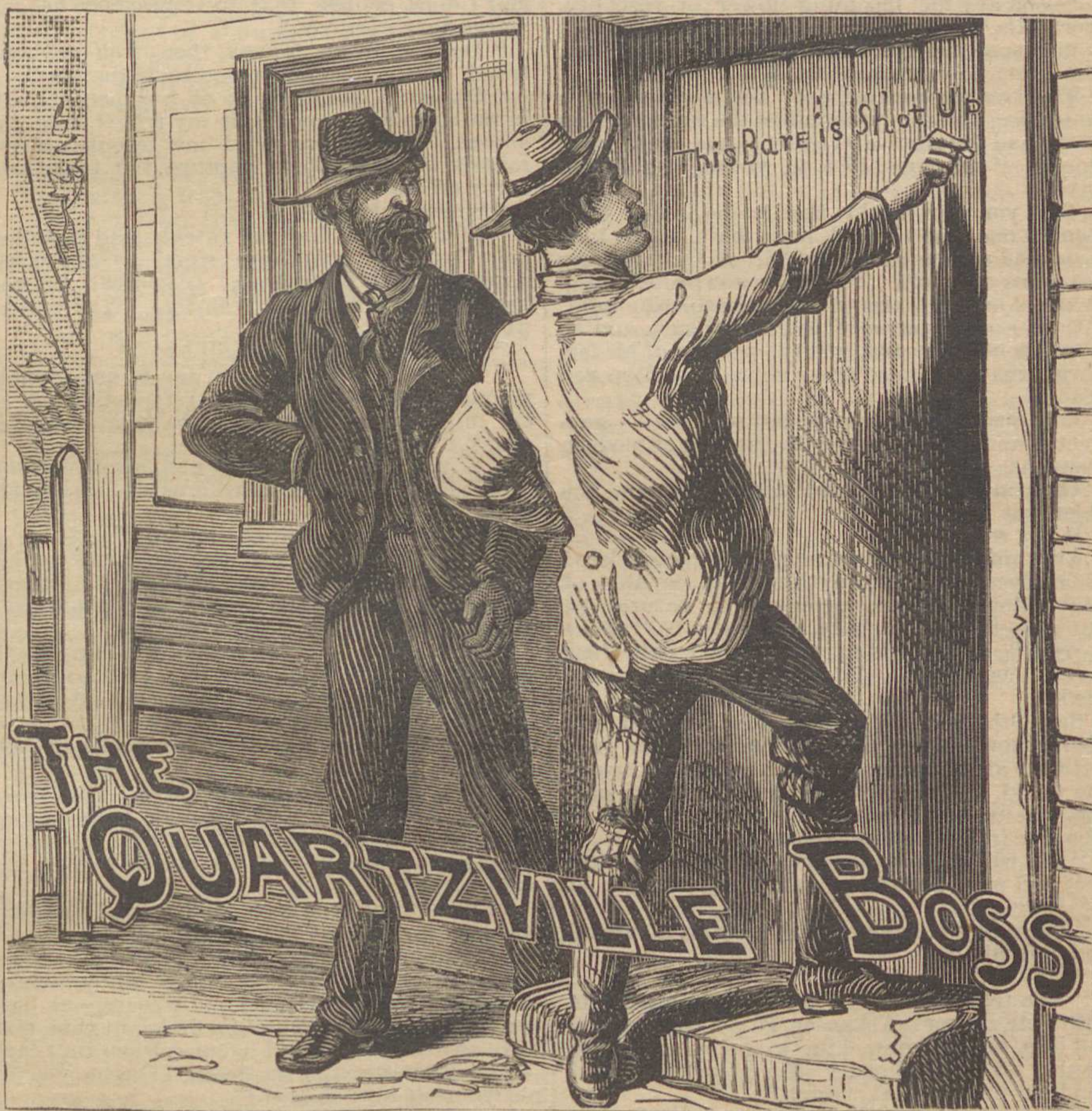
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DAN LOCKED THE SALOON, AND ON THE UNPAINTED DOOR HE SCRAWLED THESE WORDS: "THIS BARE IS SHOT UP!"

The Quartzville Boss;

OR,

DARING DAVID DARKE.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF "SKIT, THE CABIN BOY," "FEATHER-WEIGHT, THE BOY SPY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN ATROCIOUS BARGAIN.

"WELL, I must say that you are a sweet-scented scoundrel."

"I suppose I am. Some of my friends call me Frangipanni."

"You are the blooming flower of rascality, Bert Otis."

"A specimen of stephanotis, you may say. Blooming flower is good though. Go on."

The two were seated near the remains of a camp-fire, and the remnants of the supper which they had cooked and eaten, and both were young, "yet not alike in youth," as Byron says.

The younger could hardly be more than twenty-one, and he had light hair, clear blue eyes, and a face that was full of the winning freshness of youth. The other was probably ten years older, and was of tall and athletic build. His hair and eyes were intensely black, and so was his heavy beard, and the portion of his left cheek that was uncovered showed a deep red scar.

Both were clad in rough but serviceable garments, and were armed with the best of modern weapons.

The younger was named Albert Otis, and the elder was David Darke.

What were they?

Anything and everything. They considered themselves fitted for anything, and capable of everything. Miners, prospectors, naturalists, hunters—they were daily expecting to "strike it rich" in something that would suit their several capacities. As yet they had not succeeded.

Bert Otis, his back against a cottonwood, and his feet toward the fire, was smoking his pipe with the air of a person who has not a care in the world. Darke, who had let his pipe go out, was looking at his young companion as if he would search his inmost thoughts.

"We will have to dissolve partnership right here and now, Bert Otis," said the latter.

"Why so?"

"Because you have proved yourself a coward and a villain."

"Have I?"

"You tell me that you have made a bargain with Pete Bolger—Arkansas Pete I believe they call him, and I know him to be a rascal—to waylay a train and carry off a young lady, and hand her over to that wretch."

"Well, Dave, I believe that is about the size of it."

"Does not that prove you to be a villain and a coward?"

"I suppose it does; but that is not all, old man. I may show up pretty well as a villain and a coward; but as a liar I can give myself points in each of those characters, and win every time."

"What do you mean, young man?"

"Ananias was not a huckleberry to my per-simmon. If I had stood in the sandals of that champion liar, a sudden and easy death would have been too good for me. Nothing short of burning at the stake would have filled the bill. Oh, I am a sweet-scented villain and coward; but as a liar I smell to heaven."

"What do you mean?" demanded Darke, as a puzzled look crept over his face.

"Just this, old man. When I made that bargain with the gentleman from Arkansas, I lied to him like a dog—like a big brindle bulldog. I lied to him shamefully and without remorse, and I must confess that my conscience has not worried me even yet."

"Do you mean to say, then, you amazing fraud, that you do not intend to do the job?"

"Oh, no; I intend to do it, but perhaps not in the style that would suit my friend from Arkansas. He commissioned me to enlist a few rascals like myself to capture the train and carry off the girl."

"So you told me."

"Now I must find my rascals, and it strikes me, Dave, that you are equal to any half-dozen ordinary scoundrels. If you will join the band, I may consider it complete. You will be well paid."

"I will, will I! What will I get?"

"Well, the gratitude of a lovely and lovable young woman, such as I understand this girl to be, might not add anything to your bank account, if you had one, but—"

"So you want to save the girl, not to destroy her?" eagerly exclaimed Darke, as his face brightened.

"I seem to be squinting that way."

David Darke reached out his hand to his friend, who leaned forward and took it. It was a firm and hearty hand-grasp, and there was moisture in the eyes of the elder man.

"I humbly beg your pardon, my dear boy," said he, "for having allowed myself to doubt for a moment your character as a decent white man; but you described that scheme to me so seriously and in such dead earnest that you took me in."

"But I gave it to you solid, Dave. I am tackling the truth now, and the only bother arose from the fact that you didn't wait for me to finish my story, but flew off the handle a little too suddenly."

"I understand you now, my boy, and you may consider me enlisted in the band of rascals and subject to your orders. But you should reflect a bit, my boy. That Pete Bolger is a desperate scoundrel, and is surrounded by scamps as desperate as himself. When he finds out that you have swindled him—and he must learn that fact—he will hunt you to the death. Ought you to put yourself in such peril?"

Bert Otis smiled as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"Come, now, Dave," said he, "that is a little too much. Would you caution yourself in that

The Quartzville Boss.

way? Did you ever yet know me to be afraid of any man, or set of men?"

"Of course not. You are brave to rashness. But then—"

"And I have you to back me up," interrupted Bert.

"To an unlimited extent, my boy. I promised your mother that I would look after you as if you were my own child, and I would stand by you against all odds for her sake, if not for your own. But it is no light matter in this region to provoke the enmity of Pete, the Quartzville Boss."

"All right, old man. The long and the short of it is this: I wouldn't miss attending to that bit of business for a gold mine, and if Pete Bolger tries to worry me, so much the worse for the gentleman from Arkansaw."

Between these two the will of the younger usually prevailed in spite of the experience and sound judgment of the elder. But on this occasion David Darke was not yet satisfied. He thought he might strike a new vein.

"Have you ever seen the girl, Bert?" he asked.

"Never have."

"Heard her described, perhaps?"

"Yes, after a fashion."

"Did you judge from that description that she was very pretty?"

"Well, I supposed her to be at least good looking. But that has nothing to do with the matter, old chap."

"Perhaps it hasn't. By the way, Bert, why don't Arkansas Pete do this job himself? He is abundantly able to."

"He seems to have a certain delicacy about appearing in the business."

"He is the last man I should suspect of any sort of delicacy. No scruples of conscience, I suppose?"

"Well, scarcely. What a fool I am, Dave! I have failed to give you the whole of Pete Bolger's little game. After I and my rascals have captured the girl, he and his rascals are to fall upon us and recapture her. Thus the gentleman from Arkansas is to appear in the character of a hero."

"So, now I understand the matter. It is settled, Bert. We will start at daylight."

"All right, old man. And now for a snooze. Here, Rip!"

A tall and powerful dog of the mastiff breed trotted up, and looked in the young man's face as if waiting for orders.

"It is your turn to take the first watch to-night, old boy," said Bert, "and you must get right down to business, as this is a skittish part of the country."

The dog appeared to understand his orders, and doubtless he did understand them. He trotted off to the horses, and came back wagging his tail, as if to indicate that all was right in that quarter. Then he took up a position as sentry.

The two men wrapped themselves in their blankets, and were soon sleeping soundly.

With the first signs of dawn they were awake and in a short time they had prepared and eaten their breakfast, and were riding away toward the north.

CHAPTER II.

FEARLESS PHIL.

OVER a broad plain, and near the course of a small stream that was lightly fringed with cottonwoods, a small train was slowly moving westward.

The train, outside of its attendants, consisted of but two covered wagons. The foremost wagon was heavily loaded with household goods and provisions. The hindmost one, besides carrying a supply of provender, was fitted up with sleeping accommodations for one person.

The one person rode near the wagon, mounted on a fine bay mare. She might have been about twenty years of age, and was a fresh, bright-faced blonde, with a wealth of golden hair that was prevented from flowing over her shoulders by one knot of ribbon. Although somewhat irregular as to her features, her clear blue eyes and animated expression made her handsome, at times strikingly so.

She was attired in a close-fitting, serviceable dress, and sat her horse splendidly.

This was Mabel Vintrey, and she was on her way to join her father, in charge of her uncle, John Hackett, who controlled the train.

Near her rode a beardless youth of eighteen, whose bronzed face told of much exposure to wind and weather on the plain. Yet he was by no means an ill-looking young fellow, and his eyes and mouth told of determination and daring.

He was plainly enough dressed in corduroy trousers, over which his high boots were drawn, blue flannel shirt, and dark felt hat. A heavy blanket was strapped to his saddle, a belt of cartridges encircled his waist, a knife and a revolver were visible, and a repeating-rifle rested on the saddle before him.

This was Phil Henning, who had been enlisted as one of the trainmen against the wish of Sam Spurl the guide, by John Hackett, who had taken a fancy to the lad.

As he rode near Mabel Vintrey, he was downcast and silent, and there was a troubled look on his face.

"What is the matter with you, Phil?" asked the girl. "You have not a word to say for yourself to-day, and you look worried."

"I am worried, Miss Mabel."

"What is it that troubles you?"

"I don't want to frighten you; but I am afraid that there is something wrong."

"In what way, Phil?"

"We are out of our course. We left the regular trail two days ago, and are getting further away from it every hour. I don't know why this should be."

"Do you suppose the guide has made a mistake?"

"No, indeed. He knows well enough what he is about."

"Have you asked him why he does this?"

"Yes, but he will give me no reason. He dislikes me, and he knows that I suspect him."

"Perhaps you had better speak to Uncle John."

"I will. I have been waiting, in hopes that the guide would take us back to the trail."

The other two trainmen were riding near the wagons, and John Hackett was in advance.

Sam Spurl was not visible anywhere.

John Hackett was a bluff, hearty, middle-aged man, with grizzled hair and beard. He was considered an easy-going fellow, not easily worried, though it was said of him that he was a "tough subject to tackle when r'iled."

"Well, youngster, how goes it?" he cheerily asked, when Phil Henning rode up to him.

"I am afraid, Mr. Hackett," replied Phil, "that there is something wrong."

"Something wrong? What's up now?"

"I am afraid, sir, that your guide intends treachery to the train."

"What!—Sam Spurl—treachery? What do you mean, boy?"

"You know, sir, that we left the regular trail two days ago, and now we are many miles to the north of it. That trail would have taken us direct to Quartzville, and on to Mr. Vintrey's ranch, which is, I believe, some ten miles beyond Quartzville. I can think of no good reason for coming up here out of our course."

"Perhaps Sam is taking a short cut," suggested John Hackett.

"Has he explained it to you, sir?"

"No; but I suppose he knows his business."

"I have no doubt of that; but does he mean fairly?"

"Why shouldn't he? We have no plunder worth taking, and what could he gain by betraying us?"

"I don't know," answered Phil; but he glanced over his shoulder at Mabel.

"Have you asked him about it?" inquired John Hackett.

"Yes, sir; but he shut me up at once, and would give me no sort of satisfaction."

"Well, Phil, I see him coming, and I will speak to him about it, as I have a right to."

In fact the guide was then plainly in sight, riding leisurely toward the train, which he soon joined.

Sam Spurl was a tall and brawny man of middle age, weather-beaten and bronzed to an extreme, and his long black hair and half-civilized garb gave him the appearance of an Indian. At a little distance he might easily have been mistaken for a "hostile."

Seeing John Hackett and Phil conversing in advance of the train, he rode up to them.

"Where have you been, Sam?" demanded the leader.

"Jest a-scoutin' around a bit. This yere's a resky reach o' kentry, and it stands me in hand to be kinder keerful."

"The trail was safe enough. Why did you take us off the trail and bring us so far to the north?"

Sam Spurl darted a malevolent glance at Phil Henning.

"So that young scalawag thar has been buz-zin' in your ear," said he. "He tackled me on the same p'int a while ago, and I gi'n him to understand that Sam Spurl knows his biz too well to fool with any meddlesome young upstart. And I reckon I ort to know it, as I've been on the plains and in the mountings sence I was a boy, and ken tell the whole reach like a book, from the Yallarstone to Pueblo."

"Never mind the boy, Sam. It is a fair ques-

tion that I asked you, and I have a right to an explanation."

"And it's sech a simple thing, boss, that I'm e'ena'most ashamed to explain it. This is a mighty dry season, and water is powerful sca'ce on the reg'lar trail, and water's a thing we're bound to have. Thar's water," he added, pointing at the cottonwoods that showed the course of the stream. "I allowed it would be a good thing to strike that river and foller it up a while, to make a sure thing on the water."

"What is the name of that river, Sam?" asked John Hackett.

"Mike Garry's Branch is the name I know it by. I wonder, now, ef young Know-it-all thar is satisfied."

"I think we would have found water enough on the trail," briefly replied Phil.

"You do, do you? Wal, now, as you're so smart and so peart, s'posin you just turn in and be the guide for this yere outfit. I'm ready to resign in your favor. I reckon you wouldn't be afeard to do it, as folks call you Fearless Phil."

Phil Henning hesitated, with his head down, as if doubting whether he should not accept this offer.

"There is one thing I am afraid of," he said, as he looked up. "I am afraid to risk any other lives than my own."

"Then you had better leave the business to them as onderstands it. I reckon you are satisfied, boss," added the guide, turning to the leader.

"I don't know but I am," replied John Hackett, though the troubled look in his face did not fully agree with his words.

Sam Spurl suddenly turned upon Phil Henning with a burst of passion.

"You p'ison young scamp!" he exclaimed. "You've done nothin' but make mischief sence we started. I'm a great mind to break your head!"

Phil turned so as to face the infuriated guide, and smiled a most aggravating smile.

"I'll do it, too, by blazes!" shouted Spurl, as he spurred his horse forward, and raised his big fist.

But Phil was too quick for him, and the leveled barrel of a revolver almost touched his breast.

"If you are tired of life, pitch in!" quietly remarked the lad.

"Quit that both of you!" commanded John Hackett.

"I'll have no fighting in this train, and no quarreling either. Make no mistake about that!"

Phil put up his pistol, and Sam Spurl turned away, muttering to himself.

The guide at last partly proved his sincerity by bringing the train to a halt in the shade of the cottonwoods, and the tired cattle, turned loose, gladly waded into the shallow stream.

CHAPTER III.

"GET OUT OF THIS."

HARDLY had the train gone into camp when two horsemen were discovered in the distance coming from the south.

John Hackett first discovered them, and pointed them out to the guide, who looked at them anxiously, a heavy frown on his dark face.

"Only two," he muttered. "What can that mean?"

"Thar's two men comin'," he said aloud, "and they're likely to be Injuns."

"Two white men and a dog," said Phil Henning, whose young eyes were noted for their strength and reach of vision.

Sam Spurl turned angrily upon the lad, and looked as if he would be glad to choke him; but he suppressed his passion with an effort, and replied quite calmly:

"The young feller's eyes may be better'n mine," he said, "but ef those men are white I am keen to bet that they ain't a good scrt, and we had better warn 'em off."

"I don't see what call we have to be afraid of two men," remarked John Hackett.

"Thar's no tellin', boss. They may have pardners layin' about, ready to jump on us arter those two sneak into the camp. This is a resky kentry, and decent white men are e'ena'most as sca'ce as good Injuns!"

"It is easy to make sure," said Phil. "I will ride out and see who and what they are."

He had not unsaddled his horse, and was instantly mounted.

"Hold on thar!" ordered Sam Spurl. "Thar's no good in that. It takes an old head to jedge those scamps."

"Let the boy go if he wants to risk it," said John Hackett.

It was clear that he did not fully trust the guide, who cast an angry glance at him, and then looked gloomily after Phil.

The lad had started off without waiting for permission, and in the course of half an hour he brought to the camp David Darke and Bert Otis, with whom he was chatting familiarly.

It needed but a glance to assure John Hackett that they were no prairie robbers or hard cases of any kind, and he welcomed them cordially.

"We are wanderers," said Darke, "and seeing your train we thought we might find some company to cheer us up."

"Glad to see you, young gentlemen. Light down, and you will be welcome to the best we've got."

They dismounted, and gave their horses to Phil Henning, who, as he gathered the bridles, whispered a few words to John Hackett.

The leader stepped aside a little way, and was followed by Bert Otis.

"I am sorry to tell you," said the young man, "that you are in great danger. We have come to warn and to help you."

"What's the matter?"

"Do you know a certain Pete Bolger, otherwise known as Arkansaw Pete?"

"Can't say that I do."

"But he knows you, or knows of you, and he knows of that young lady yonder."

Honest John Hackett's face blanched. It struck him for the first time that there was a motive for villainy which he had not suspected.

There was a sort of choking in his throat as he requested the young man to go on and tell what he knew.

"That same Pete Bolger," said Otis, "wants to get possession of the young lady I speak of—for what reason I don't know—and he's hired a rascal to enlist some other rascals for the purpose of striking this train and carrying her off. I am the rascal he employed, and my friend yonder is the rest of the rascals. The gentleman from Arkansaw happened to get hold of the wrong man—that's all."

John Hackett's clinched hands and compressed lips showed how strongly he was excited by this plain statement.

"I don't know why any man should wish harm to that innocent child," said he, "and no man shall ever harm her while I am able to lift a finger. My young friend, your face and your voice tell me to trust you, and I am inclined to believe what you say; but—"

"But I have not told you all, Mr. Hackett. Your guide, Sam Spurl, is in the plot. He is in Pete Bolger's pay, and it is to help the scheme that he has taken your train far out of the proper course."

A fierce light flamed in John Hackett's eyes.

"I see it now!" he exclaimed. "Stranger as you are, I believe you. What had I better do?"

"I will settle the matter if you will allow me to," replied Bert. "The first thing is to get rid of your treacherous guide, and I will undertake that task."

"All right. I am with you."

Bert Otis started for the spot where Sam Spurl was standing, closely followed by Hackett.

David Carke in the mean time had sought out the guide, and had endeavored to engage him in conversation, but with poor success. Spurl eyed him suspiciously, and gave him short and surly answers.

When Bert Otis approached, with John Hackett just behind him, the guide looked at them closely and anxiously. He evidently believed that there was something unusual in the air, and wondered what it was.

The two other trainmen were occupied with their duties, and Mabel was partly concealed behind one of the wagons, curiously inspecting the strangers.

Bert Otis advanced toward Spurl with a smile on his face, and Darke stepped aside a few paces.

"Good evening, Mr. Spurl," said Bert. "I am glad to see you."

"Don't say," was the growling reply.

"Yes, Mr. Spurl, I have heard of you, and I say again that I am glad to meet you. But I suppose that we are not the men you had expected to see."

"What men had I expected to see?"

"Why, the Quartzville Boss and his pards."

The guide started back as if he had been shot, and a fearful storm of caths burst from his lips.

"What do you mean by that?" he shouted.

"What have I got to do with the Quartzville Boss?"

"Don't fly into a passion, Mr. Spurl," replied Bert, smiling yet more pleasantly. "The easiest way is the best, I assure you. Your little game has been found out and is in a fair way to be shut down on. Your friend, Mr. Bolger, talks a little too freely to strangers. What you

have to do now is, to get on your horse and get out of this right away."

Another stream of oaths poured from the lips of the guide, and his hand dropped to his pistol.

"Don't draw that, you scoundrel!" shouted a voice that had the tone of command.

Spurl looked around, and saw that he was covered by David Darke's rifle, and Bert Otis's revolver was bearing on him the next instant. Phil Henning was also there, and ready for action.

The other two trainmen had hastened to the scene of action, and hesitated, as if uncertain which side they ought to take.

"There is nothing here to worry you, boys," said John Hackett. "Saddle Sam Spurl's horse, and bring him here."

Perceiving that he was cornered, the guide changed his tone.

"I'd like to know what this means, boss," said he. "Because two strangers—and nobody knows who they are—come here with a pack of lies, do you want to turn me adrift?"

"It means, Sam Spurl," replied Hackett, "that I could easily kill any man who would plot against my sister's child, and I can hardly keep from shooting you down as you stand!"

"But these men are strangers, and they don't fetch no proofs. I am a known man, and I come to you with a good character."

"You have lost it, then. You should never have brought my train up here, if you meant fairly."

"You are wasting time in words, Mr. Spurl," said Bert Otis. "There is nothing for you to do but to get out of this."

The guide's horse had been brought to him, and he mounted it.

"It is a hard thing," said he, "to drive a man off jest as night is comin' on."

"It is too easy for you," replied Bert, "and you had better be thankful that you can get off so easy. You know the way well enough, and you will go straight to your friend, Arkansaw Pete. Tell him that the next time he wants to hire a rascal, he should be careful not to strike the wrong man!"

The discarded guide turned in his saddle and glared at them all.

"Cuss you for a set of fools and sneaks!" he exclaimed. "Ef you hadn't stole the drop on me, you wouldn't be standin' thar. You shall suffer for this, as sure as my name is Sam Spurl! You shall pay for it, every mother's son of you—yes, and every mother's daughter, too!"

The last words excited John Hackett to frenzy. He raised his rifle, and would have shot down the speaker if he had not been restrained by Bert Otis.

Sam Spurl rode away rapidly in the twilight, his course pointing due southwest.

CHAPTER IV.

THE KING OF QUARTZVILLE.

THE Gold Brick Saloon stood alone at a considerable distance from any other house on the outskirts of the town of Quartzville.

It was in a queer place for a saloon, but it attracted a peculiar kind of custom, and no small amount of it, as it was one of the favorite resorts of Peter Bolger, otherwise known as Arkan-

saw Pete, Gold Brick's Boss, and the Quartzville Boss.

He was well entitled to that dignity, and no man in that rapid and thriving "city" was more feared, and consequently more respected.

He had come to Quartzville with quite a "crowd" of his own, and had started the Gold Brick.

These enterprises of themselves gave him a large following, and he had increased it by selecting as his associates and aids the most vicious and desperate characters in that region, all of whom looked up to him as their "boss," and rendered him implicit obedience.

Thus it was that the town of Quartzville came under the rule of the roughs. They might not have been as numerous as the orderly and law-abiding people; but they were more self-asserting, and they knew how to make peaceable people afraid of them.

As for the Quartzville Boss, it may be said that he looked the part well. He had but little of the appearance or manner of a rough. Tall and of large frame, with a fine form and commanding figure, he was always well-dressed, and carried himself with a stateliness that well became him, and was calculated to impose upon a stranger.

It seemed to be a rather exclusive company which was assembled at the Gold Brick at noon on that day—in fact, a select party.

They were nine in number, including Arkansaw Pete, and not counting Dan Gilligan, the barkeeper, and they were seated around a table at the far end of the room, consuming a substantial luncheon. Their nine horses were feeding under a shed back of the shanty.

Dan Gilligan, when he was not occupied in serving the party with liquid refreshments, was looking out of the dirty window, taking note of the infrequent passers-by.

Thus Arkansaw Pete and his friends could talk as they pleased, without fear of listeners.

"This is a good place to stay, Pete," said one of them; "but I'd a heap ruther be 'tendin' to business and 'arnin' a little money. I allowed we'd be on the war-path afore now."

"Don't be in too much of a hurry, Jack," replied the leader. "There is a chance that the job may prove a tougher one than I am calculating on. I didn't expect to hear anything before this time, but now I am looking for news."

"Here comes somebody," said Dan Gilligan, "and he's makin' for the Gold Brick, lickety split."

The galloping of a horse could be heard by those inside, and a man rode up to the shanty, dismounted, hitched his horse, and entered the bar-room.

"Kin you tell me, young man, whar I'll find Pete Bolger?"

Arkansaw Pete had already stepped forward with some of his party, and he held out his hand as he recognized the speaker.

"Why, Sam Spurl! I am ever so glad to see you. I was expecting a messenger from your way, but never thought you would send yourself. Is all right, old hoss? Have you got the girl?"

"Got nothin'," replied the guide. "They've got me."

"What do you mean by that?"
 "I've left the train—resigned my posish."
 "Why did you resign?"
 "Jest because I was kicked out o' camp."
 "Kicked out? You?"

"Wal, I was ordered to leave, with a few rifles and revolvers to back the order, and, as they had the drop on me, dead, I thought I had better slide off."

"But why was that? How did it happen?"

"Jest all along o' your durned foolishness. It seems that you run across some young chap somewhar, and give away your game to him, and hired him to help you kerry it out. So the young chap and his pardner struck the train jest arter we'd gone inter camp, and blowed the hull business, and that settled the case of Sam Spurl. He told me to go to you, and to tell you that the next time you hire a rascal you ort to be keerful not to strike the wrong man."

"What did he look like—that young chap?"

Sam Spurl gave a good description of Bert Otis.

"I did put my foot in it then," said the Quartzville Boss, "but I was sure that the young fellow was all right and on the make. To think that such a youngster should fool this hard old head! But I will make him pay for this, and he will wish he had never meddled with me."

"I've got a hefty account to settle with that crowd, too," said Spurl, "specially with the chap who swindled you, and one other youngster. What are you gwine to do now, Pete?"

"I don't mean to cry over spilt milk. I told the boys that this might turn out to be a tougher job than I had calculated on. There is only one thing for it now, and that is to play the Injun game. We must light right out, too, as there is no time to lose. Will you go with us, Sam, or are you tired out?"

"Nothin' tires me, as you know; but my hoss is played."

"Leave him here and take Dan's."

"Whar's the Injun rig?"

"Right here, plenty of it. We will each take a disguise, and will put them on when we need them."

CHAPTER V.

PETE BOLGER'S BLOW.

"I RECKON we've done right," said John Hackett, as his treacherous guide rode away from the train camp. "In fact, I don't feel a doubt of it."

"There is not the least doubt of it," replied Bert Otis. "Let us sit down, and I will give you all the particulars as far as I know them."

They sat down and Otis gave a full account of his meeting with Pete Bolger, the plot disclosed to him by the Quartzville Boss and the part that he was to take in carrying it out.

"That's as straight as a shingle, and I believe every word you tell me," said John Hackett. "But I haven't got hold of your names yet, my friends."

Bert Otis introduced himself and his companion.

"Otis," mused Hackett. "That is a familiar name to me. I knew an Otis right well once. His name was Ben Otis."

"Did he live at Wellsville, Ohio?"

"Yes."

"That was my father," said Bert.

"He married Sarah Emmons."

"That was my mother."

"Give me your hand, my boy! I knew there must be something that made me take to you and trust you so. Your father was one of the best and truest men I ever knew, and your mother was a sort of a relation of mine. Here, Mabel! Come here! This is an old friend of mine, or the son of an old friend."

Mabel was right at hand. She had been waiting close by, near enough to catch a little of what was said, and she stepped briskly forward, smiling and blushing.

She was made acquainted with the young men, and as Bert Otis gazed into her bright face his blushes were quite as visible as her own.

"I want to thank you both for your great kindness in coming to us," she said. "I have kept my eyes and ears open, and learned much of what was going on, and what I did not find out for myself Phil told me. But what can that man have wanted of me, and do you suppose there is any more danger?"

Bert did not try to answer her first question, though he could easily guess what Pete Bolger might want of her, and he hesitated over her second question.

"I am afraid that we are not out of the woods yet," he replied. "That scoundrel may not give up the game because I have gone back on him, and there is no doubt that he is a desperate and dangerous man. I hardly know what is best to be done now."

"It is my notion," remarked the leader, "that we ought to get back into the regular trail, and I suppose we can strike it by taking a southerly course."

"But that trail leads to Quartzville, Mr. Hackett, and the question is whether it will be safe to go through that town or near it. Arkansaw Pete is known as the Quartzville Boss, and you can have no idea what his influence amounts to. He does as he pleases there, and nobody dares to call him to account. It seems to me that we had better keep to the north, and try to pass around his dominions."

"Why do you say *we*?" asked Hackett. "You almost make me think that you mean to go on with us."

"Of course we do, sir—both of us do. Nothing short of death shall prevent me from seeing this train safe to its destination."

Bert looked so earnestly and decidedly at John Hackett looked at him in surprise, but a closer observer would have noticed that the young man was gazing at Mabel Vintrey, who answered his gaze with a blush.

"That would be more than we would have a right to look for, and your friend may object," said Hackett.

"Not I," replied David Darke. "I back Bert Otis to any extent, and I think he is quite right when he advises you to go around Quartzville. If you should aim for the trail, you would go toward Arkansaw Pete, and he might have you just where he wants you. The only question is whether you can find your way around."

Phil Henning then spoke up. He had a pretty good general knowledge of the country, and believed that he could at least pilot the party without getting them lost.

It was settled that Phil should act as guide, with the advice and assistance of Darke and Otis, and early the next morning the train again started on its slow journey toward the west, scouts riding ahead and at the south to look out for danger signs.

It was plain enough sailing for the prairie schooners over the rolling plain; but nobody pretended to say what they would do when they reached the hills that loomed up in the distance, where they were not likely to find any sort of a wagon road.

Nothing unusual was noticed until late in the afternoon, when David Darke, who had been scouting at the south, rode up and reported that he had seen a man peering over the edge of a rise in that direction. He had ridden up the rise to get a better view, but the man had disappeared, having probably taken refuge in a belt of timber beyond.

"He looked like an Indian," said Darke.

"It is more likely to have been Sam Spurl," remarked Phil. "You may bet your last dollar that he is not going to leave us alone. If it is Sam, there are more behind him, and they mean business."

It was agreed that the best thing to be done would be to halt the train right there, and make the best preparations possible to fight off any foes that might be lurking about.

The cattle were driven down to the branch, and the horses were concealed in the timber at a distance from the camp, which was located on high and open ground.

An ample supply of water was brought in, and all hands set at work to fortify the position.

The camp was made as small as possible, the wagons, stripped of their covers, being drawn up on two sides, and all available articles being used for a barricade. At each end the turf was torn up, and a trench was dug, on the outer edge of which the earth was piled.

After supper the camp-fire was extinguished and two sentries were stationed outside, with orders to run in at once if an attack should be made.

It was the opinion of all that, whether genuine Indians or white men in disguise were lurking about, they would adopt the Indian method, and attack under cover of the night.

The night was favorable for such a purpose. There was no moon, and clouds were blown across the sky, at times obscuring it entirely.

Bert Otis's dog Rip proved to be the best sentry.

When the night was at its darkest, and when the men outside were unable to see any sign of life or motion on the rolling plain, Rip's deep growl was heard, and then his heavy, warning bark.

Otis, who was outside, called to the other sentry to go in.

"The dog knows what he is about," said he, "and you may bet that he don't bark for nothing."

The others were instantly aroused, and the

six men (of course counting Phil Henderson as a man) took the stations that had been assigned to them.

Anxiously they waited, but it seemed to them that hardly five minutes had passed when their enemies were upon them.

The soft turf had deadened the sound of horses' feet, and the best eyes were unable to penetrate the darkness to any considerable distance.

Suddenly, as if they had emerged from a cloud, a number of horsemen were seen, sweeping down on the camp with savage yells, accompanied by the flashing of firearms and the singing of bullets.

The rifles in the camp answered rapidly and effectively; but the rush was so swift and certain that some of the horsemen dashed in over the earth barricade at one end of the camp, and there followed a hand-to-hand fight about the wagons.

The first man over fired his pistol right in the face of John Hackett; but his horse stumbled the next instant, and he was shot down by Phil Henning.

Mabel Vintrey had been protected from chance shots by a pair of mattresses; but she rose up in her excitement, and a large man, mounted on a powerful horse, seized her arm as he dashed through the camp, and attempted to swing her up on his horse.

But the dog, Rip, who had been waiting for a good chance to "catch on," leaped and fastened his teeth in the horseman's arm.

With a curse he dropped the girl, and Bert Otis, who had just settled one of the raiders, caught her and drew her away in time to prevent her from being trampled to death.

The tall horseman turned with leveled pistol.

"Here's your dose, you young sneak!" he shouted, in a voice that surely had nothing of the Indian about it. "That settles your account!"

He fired, and Bert Otis fell on the ground by the side of the swooning Mabel.

But though John Hackett and Otis were down, the men who guarded the camp had the best of the fight.

Their rifles had done sharp work as the enemy came on, reducing the number of their assailants, and those who got into the camp were so huddled together that their fighting chances were limited.

Phil Henning, when he had shot down the first man over dashed at the others like a tiger that has tasted blood, emptying his revolver with wonderful quickness, and David Darke, cool and calm, made his shots count as if he were shooting at a mark.

The two trainmen were also active, and the tall horseman, when he had struck down Bert Otis with his single shot, saw that the struggle was over and the game was up.

He called to his followers, and those who were able to do so galloped away with him into the darkness.

By this time the wind had blown the clouds away, and under a starlit sky the victors were able to appreciate their defeat of their foe and to take note of their own losses.

CHAPTER VI.

THE UNKINDEST CUT OF ALL.

PHIL HENNING grabbed his rifle, and was hastening to send a parting shot after the flying raiders, when his attention was attracted by Mabel Vintrey and Bert Otis, who were lying together on the ground.

He dropped by the side of Mabel and hastily examined her for a wound, but found none.

He quickly procured a cup of water, which he dashed in her face, and she revived, sitting up and staring about as if she were dazed.

Then her gaze rested on Bert Otis, who was lying lifeless at her side, the blood oozing from his head, and her piercing screams brought all her friends to her.

"He is dead!" she shrieked. "That brave and noble young man who came to save us and risk his life for us is dead, and he died for me!"

"Merciful Heaven!" exclaimed David Darke, as he knelt by his friend. "The dear boy is dead! How will I ever break this to his mother?"

"Not yet, Dave," came faintly from the lips of the dead man. "Lift me up, old man."

Darke raised his friend's head, and called for water, with which he washed the blood from the wound, discovering that the bullet had glanced off from the skull, leaving an ugly cut.

"He thought he had saved me," murmured Bert; "but he shot a bit too high. I feel, though, as if a mule had kicked me."

Dave put his brandy flask to the young man's lips, and he was soon on his feet and walking about, while his friend was looking for adhesive plaster.

Phil Henning was nudged by one of the trainmen, and followed him to where John Hackett's body was lying in the trench. The leader of the train had been shot through the head, and life was entirely extinct.

The lad threw a blanket over the body, unwilling that Mabel should see it then.

"And this," he said, spurning with his foot a dead man lying near, "is the scoundrel who killed him, and whom I shot. He looks like an Injun, but—as sure as you live, Hank, it is Sam Spurl!"

It was, indeed, Sam Spurl, and it was the general opinion that he at least had perished none too soon, with his vengeance incomplete.

There were two other bodies inside the camp, clothed in Indian garb, and with their faces painted; but a slight investigation proved them to be unmistakably white men.

"It was nothing but foolishness for them to try the Indian dodge," said Phil Henning. "They would have done just as well to play their game openly."

"They should at least have held their tongues," remarked Otis. "I know well enough that the man who shot at me was Arkansaw Pete. His voice gave him away."

It was necessary to inform Mabel Vintrey of her uncle's death. Otis and Phil broke the sad news to her as gently as possible, and led her to his body.

The poor girl burst into a passion of tears.

"What will become of us now?" she despairingly asked, when her sobs allowed her to

speak. "My poor, dear uncle John is dead, and how will I ever get to my father?"

"You have some true friends left, Miss Vintrey," said Bert Otis. "Mr. Darke and I will stand by you while there is life in us, and so, I am sure, will the others."

"And here is one man—for I will never again call him a boy"—said Darke, laying his hand on Phil's shoulder, "who can be depended on, and whose courage and skill are such as any grown man might be proud of. Come, now, Bert, and let me dress your head."

The body of John Hackett was buried, and the grave was marked; but those of the marauders were treated with far less respect.

At an early hour in the morning the train again took up its tedious journey toward the west, all the party saddened by the absence of him who had been left behind, and by the thought of the difficulties and dangers that might yet be in store for them.

Mabel was inconsolable at first, breaking out every now and then in fits of weeping; but Bert Otis and Phil were at her side, doing their best to cheer her up, and she gradually recovered her spirits, making much of Bert's big dog, whose teeth had done her such good service the night before.

The day passed, as the previous day had, without any alarm or sign of danger, and when the train came to a halt, toward the close of the afternoon, it had reached the broken ground near the hills that rose gradually toward the west until they formed part of the great mountain range.

"I can't guess how we are to find or make a way for the teams from this on," said Phil Henning, as he sat on his horse and sadly looked westward. "But, if we get through the night safely, some of us must scout around and try for a trail."

"If no other way offers," suggested Darke, "we can skirt along the edge of the hills until we strike a trail to the southward."

The camp was located, as that of the previous night had been, on high and open ground, and was similarly fortified, except that deeper trenches were dug, and higher earth barricades made, at each end.

The cattle were driven into the cottonwoods that lined a small stream, and the horses were concealed in the timber further away.

Two sentries were stationed on the outside, and the rest of the tired party fell asleep, forgetting for the time the terrible scenes they had passed through and the dangers they expected to encounter.

Again it was Rip that aroused the camp, and at about the middle of the night.

He was on the north side of the camp, and his attention was turned toward the stream near which the cattle were tethered.

All strained their eyes and ears to look and to listen, but could neither see nor hear anything in that quarter.

Yet the big dog's excitement continued, and his warning bark spoke plainly of danger of some kind.

"Rip knows his business," remarked Bert Otis. "He never fooled me yet. We may be sure that there is something prowling about,"

"I think there must be something the matter with the cattle," said Phil Henning, as he picked up his rifle. "I will go down there and squint around."

"I will go with you," said Bert.

"No, Mr. Otis. There may be some risk in it, and it is not worth while for more than one of us to run the chances. Two could do no more than one can."

"Neither of you shall go, if I can help it," declared Darke. "If our enemies are there, they could easily shoot you down from the cover of the timber, and then they would make no bones of capturing the camp. We can afford to lose anything rather than our men, and our only chance is to keep together and defend the camp and Miss Vintrey."

Mabel added her entreaties to David Darke's arguments, and the young fellows suffered themselves to be persuaded.

After awhile the dog ceased his warning bark, and all was quiet until morning.

The worried party were thankful that they had not been attacked during the night; but none of them had the faintest hope that their difficulties were at an end.

As soon as it was light enough for the purpose Phil Henning and Bert Otis set out for the stream, sending Rip ahead as a scout.

The dog gave no warning of danger, and they went direct to the place where the cattle had been left.

All were gone!

They hastened up the stream to the place where they had concealed the horses.

Not a hoof was left!

All their means of locomotion, except their own legs, had been spirited away in the night.

They found themselves set afoot, in an unknown region, with no certainty of anything but enemies.

CHAPTER VII.

A FLANK ATTACK.

At the foot of the mountain-range lay Frank Vintrey's cattle-ranch, a fair expanse of hill and dale, forest and pasture land. The house, a commodious and respectable wooden building, stood at the edge of a grove, and a few large trees scattered before it gave the appearance of a lawn.

The sun was just about to rise, but all connected with the ranch were early astir, and the proprietor, stepping out on the broad covered porch, looked up for weather signs.

The morning was clear, and the day promised to be fine.

Frank Vintrey was a healthy and hearty middle-aged man, with nothing striking in his appearance or character, except that he had plenty of pluck and determination. He had taken up the land that formed his ranch with the intention of establishing a large cattle-farm, and neither the dangers of the early settlement nor the temptations of mining speculation had caused him to vary from that settled purpose.

As soon as he considered the country sufficiently safe and himself sufficiently prosperous, he had sent for his motherless daughter and his wife's brother.

Frank Vintrey was usually a bright, cheerful, matter-of-fact man, but this morning his brow was clouded and his mind was troubled—and all because of a dream.

As his foreman, Stephen Hersey, came near the porch, Mr. Vintrey beckoned to him.

"Come here, Steve; I have something to tell you," he said, and the two men seated themselves on the hide-bottomed chairs.

"I had a strange dream, last night," said Mr. Vintrey, "and it troubled me more than I like to own up to."

Steve Hersey happened to be a strong believer in dreams and omens, and he was naturally curious about this dream, so Mr. Vintrey went on and related it to him.

"You know that I am expecting my brother-in-law and my daughter from the East. I am looking for them every day. I dreamed that they were in great trouble at a place you and I know well. You remember where we had a little difficulty last fall about some stray steers?"

"Yes."

"That is the place. I dreamed that the train was attacked at night by white men disguised as Indians, that John Hackett was killed, and that the leader of the attacking party was Arkansaw Pete."

"Do you know him?" asked Hersey.

"No. I never saw the man, to my knowledge. You know that for a long time I have preferred to go further for my supplies rather than to trade in Quartzville, while rowdies rule there, and I have not been near the town. But something told me that the man I speak of was Arkansaw Pete."

"Can you tell me what he looked like?"

Mr. Vintrey described the man of his dream.

"That's the King of Quartzville himself!" exclaimed Hersey. "I don't want to worry you, Mr. Vintrey, but there must be something in that dream, since you saw in it a man you never saw when you were awake. There's a good bit in dreams, anyhow."

"I believe there is, in some dreams," replied the ranchman, "and this dream has troubled me so that I am going to ride into Quartzville, and perhaps further. The trail that my folks ought to take leads through that town, though they seemed to be so far from it in my dream. I shall not feel easy until I see them or hear from them."

Frank Vintrey saddled a bay mare, and rode away toward Quartzville, reaching that town before noon.

He hitched his mare in front of a store, and was looking about for somebody who would be likely to give him information, when he was rudely accosted by a rough-looking man who carried two revolvers in plain sight.

"Say, stranger, ain't your name Frank Vintrey?"

"Yes," replied the ranchman.

"Thought so. You're jest the galoot I'm lookin' arter. I was gwine to ride out to your place—I and some other fellers."

"What is your business with me?"

"Jest a little law business. I'm Jeems Jobe, the sheriff, and I arrest you on this yer' warrant."

"Arrest me? Me? What for?"

"Cattle-stealin'."

"For cattle-stealing? What sort of a joke is this?"

"Thar ain't no joke about it. It's dead 'arnest, as you'll find out."

"But this is absurd. Why should I want to steal cattle? I have plenty of my own."

"Too many, some folks say, and that's what's the matter."

"There is something wrong about this," insisted Mr. Vintrey. "If it is not a joke, it must be a mistake. Is it really a warrant that you have there?"

"You jest bet it is. Thar you see it in black an' white, with Judge Toler's name at the bottom. Come along and see him, now, and don't try to make trouble, or you'll git the wu'st of it."

As quite a crowd of men had collected about them, all of whom evidently sided with the sheriff, there was nothing for Mr. Vintrey to do but to go with that official, accompanied by the crowd.

Judge Toler, so-called, was found in his office, a shanty adjoining Arkansaw Pete's saloons.

He was a short, bulky man, with a fat face, small eyes, and a bulbous red nose.

Jim Jobe produced his prisoner, and handed the writ to Toler, who indorsed it, "Sarved by ketchin' him and fetchin' him."

"Now," said the court, "we will hear the case of the people of Quartzville ag'in Frank Vintrey, charged with cattle-stealin'."

"If you please," remarked Mr. Vintrey, "as this is a strange and unexpected accusation, I would like to have the assistance of a lawyer."

"You don't need to worry about a lawyer," replied Toler. "Chance enough for that afore hangin'-time comes. This yer' is only an examination *pro forma sine quinine*. That's Latin, and I reckon you don't onderstand it; but the court does, and that's enough. Whar's the witness, Blue Tophet?"

One of the roughest of the crowd stepped forward, and Mr. Vintrey recognized him as a well-known cattle-thief and desperado, who was known in those parts as Blue Tophet. He was the same fellow with whom the ranchman had had the "little difficulty" about some stray steers, of which he spoke to Stephen Hersey.

Mr. Vintrey jumped up, thoroughly angry.

"I would like to know," he demanded, "whether the evidence of such a rascal as that is to count against a respectable white man?"

"Set right down, prisoner," ordered Toler. "It is contempt of court to abuse the witnesses for the persecution, and it will only make the thing wuss for you; so you had better keep quiet. The witness will tell his story."

Blue Tophet proceeded to testify to the effect that in the fall of the previous year he had been the owner of half a dozen steers, and that he was driving them to Quartzville for the purpose of selling them, when he was set upon by the prisoner and two other men, who forcibly took the cattle from him and drove them away. He had since learned that the prisoner had sent the cattle to the East with a drove of his own.

Mr. Vintrey asked the witness a number of questions; but, though he kept his eyes fixed on

the floor, he stuck stoutly to the story he had told.

"The court is dry," remarked Toler, at the close of this cross-examination. "Mr. Sheriff, step in next door and tell Tom to send me four fingers of the same."

The ranchman rose and made a little speech for himself.

He said that he was known in those parts to be an honest, law-abiding and responsible man, and that his word ought to be worth at least as much, if not a great deal more than the word of such a person as Blue Tophet, who was known to be neither honest nor law-abiding nor responsible.

The cattle in question, he stated, were stray steers of his own, and he could prove that they belonged to him by his foreman and others, if he should be allowed to send for them. When he hunted the cattle, and found Blue Tophet driving them off, he simply took possession of his own property, as he had a lawful right to do.

To this there was no reply. The "four fingers of the same" which the court had ordered was brought in, and was speedily absorbed.

"The fact is," said Toler, "that this sort of thing has been goin' on too long. A good many folks have wondered how it is that the ranchmen about yere raise so many cattle, and git rich off o' nothin'. A reliable witness has jest showed up one way they have of doin' the trick. What the prisoner says for himself ain't evidence, and don't count. Thar's only one witness, and he's for the persecution. So I must send the prisoner to jail, to stay thar until his reg'lar trial comes off."

Mr. Vintrey was astounded. He had understood that Quartzville was "run" by the hard cases of the town, but had not supposed that things were as bad as this. It seemed to him that Toler's proceeding must be intenedd to extort money from him, or for some worse purpose, and that it was useless to resist it or protest against it.

He looked around for a friend or sympathizer, but found none. The room was filled with the rowdy element, and he could hardly expect to find any friends in that town, as he did not trade with its merchants, and was unknown in its saloons.

But he saw in the front of the crowd a tall and large man whose appearance startled him.

It was Arkansaw Pete, the man of his dream!

The ranchman sprung forward, pointing his fingers excitedly at the tall man.

"Is it you, Jim Boyce?" he exclaimed. "Is this your doing? What infernal deviltry have you got on foot now?"

Arkansaw Pete started back and turned pale at this assault, but quickly recovered himself.

"Is there any man here named Jim Boyce?" he asked, as he looked around.

"Looks as if the prisoner mought be a leetle off his nut," remarked Toler. "Take him to the cooler, Mr. Sheriff."

Frank Vintrey was led away, followed by the crowd, to the Quartzville jail, a substantial log building.

He had set out to search for his daughter, and had succeeded in getting into prison.

CHAPTER VIII.

WILD JIM, THE SOLITARY.

BERT OTIS and Phil Henning's report of the disappearance of all the stock caused great consternation in the camp. It was the general conclusion that the enemies who had attacked them the night before had adopted that sneaking scheme in the belief that they would thus have the party at their mercy, and would be able to capture them at their leisure.

The two trainmen, who regarded being "set afoot" as the greatest of evils, were utterly bewildered by the turn affairs had taken.

"What can that man want of me, and why does he persecute us so?" despairingly exclaimed Mabel.

"We are in a deuce of a pickle now," said David Darke.

But Phil Henning and Bert Otis were inclined to take a more cheerful view of the matter.

"There is one consolation," remarked Phil. "I couldn't guess what we would ever do with the teams when we got into the hills; but we won't be bothered about that now, anyhow."

"That's so," said Bert. "We may say that we are foot-loose, and I shouldn't wonder if the loss of the stock proves to be the best thing that could have happened to us. Among the hills and ravines we ought to be able to keep out of the reach of those scoundrels, and I can't see why we should not find our way to Mr. Vintrey's ranch."

"But how will we live while we are wandering among the hills?" asked Mabel.

"Oh, that is an easy question to answer. We will take a supply of provisions from the wagons and if that gives out we have our rifles. Dave and I have traveled ever so far without coming in sight of a settlement."

It was clear that it would never do to stay by the wagons and fight it out there, as their enemies, if so inclined, could easily cut them off from water, and their only chance of safety was to push on into the hills.

This being settled, the sooner they were off the better.

The men strapped blankets on their backs, loaded themselves with as much food as they could conveniently carry and a supply of ammunition, and the party trudged away toward the west, occasionally looking back gloomily at the wagons.

Shortly after they had passed out of sight of those monuments of disaster they were brought to a standstill by finding themselves at the edge of a canyon.

It was not one of the monster canyons that excite the wonder of those who see them for the first time, and they could easily enough descry the bottom of the valley where a rapid stream tumbled over rocks and boulders; but it was, as Bert Otis said, "no slouch of a ravine," and the side on which they found themselves was very difficult of descent.

They scattered along the edge, looking for a break in the wall of rock, and Phil Henning was the first to find what was considered a practicable route.

The men climbed down laboriously, but without incurring serious danger, and Mabel's task was considerably lightened by the assistance of

Bert Otis, who stayed at her side and helped her over the worst places—an assistance which she seemed rather to court than to decline.

So they safely reached the foot of the declivity, and were proud of the feat when they looked back at the point from which they had started.

"Don't you see that we are better off than we were with the wagons?" asked Phil. "If these scalawags hunt us again up yonder they will never get their horses down here, and it will worry them to follow us, anyhow."

After a rest and a lunch they went on, working their way down the valley.

It was difficult and tedious traveling; but they consoled themselves with the reflection that it would also be difficult for others if they should be pursued, and that by following the course of the stream they would probably be drawing nearer to the vicinity of Frank Vintrey's ranch.

As the day drew near its close they began to look about for a suitable shelter for the night, or at least for a better camping-place than the stony bottom of the ravine afforded.

Phil Henning, whose eyes were of the sharpest, spied a hole in the rock, part way up the cliff, and called the attention of his companions to it.

"Such holes often open into caverns of some size," he said. "If that one does we may find a hiding-place as well as a shelter."

"Provided that it is not already occupied by some wild beast," suggested cautious David Darke.

"Well, it is worth looking into, and here goes for a squint at it."

Phil clambered up the rocks, followed by the others. Mabel, who insisted on going with the rest, was considerably assisted by Bert Otis.

The hole was larger than it had seemed to be when they looked at it from below, and Phil perceived that he could easily enter it on his hands and knees.

He crawled in, and quickly whispered back to those behind him:

"It is a big hole, sure enough, and I believe there is a light in there. It looks like it, anyhow."

He went in further, and called back to his companions:

"I guess you may come in. This is no wild beast's den, I am pretty certain."

David Darke and one of the trainmen entered the hole, and Bert Otis's curiosity was so strong that he could not help following them.

Phil, who was still in advance, stumbled over something, and felt for it.

It was plainly a piece of man's handiwork. In fact, it was a stool.

"We must try to get a light somehow," said Phil. "This hole is inhabited, or has been."

Yes, it was inhabited, as they speedily had reason to know.

The light which Phil had noticed quickly grew brighter, and from some recess in the rear darted out an old man, with white hair and long, white beard, clothed in tattered garments.

In his left hand he held a vessel filled with melted grease, in which floated a burning wick, and his face was red with passion.

"Who are you?" he furiously demanded. "What are you doing here? Get out of my house!"

The men he addressed were too much astonished to answer him immediately, and he seized with his right hand a cord that hung against the rock.

"Do you see this string?" he shouted. "The walls of this place, right where you stand, are charged with blasting cartridges. If I pull the string, you will never know what hurt you. Get out, then, before I pull it!"

David Darke made a step forward, and spoke in calm and persuasive tones.

"Listen to me a moment, old man. I want you to make no mistake about us. We are quiet, peaceable and decent people, who mean no harm to you or anybody else. We did not know that you lived here, as we discovered this place by accident. We are endeavoring to escape from a band of rascally white men, who attacked our camp night before last, and killed our leader. Last night they ran off our horses and cattle, and we were obliged to leave our wagons on the plain and come down here afoot. We only ask a shelter for the night, and are willing to pay for it."

"I want none of your money, and I want none of you," fiercely replied the old man.

"Look out there, all of you! I can see every move you make. If one of you tries to lift a weapon, I will pull the string and send the whole pack of you into eternity."

"There is a young lady with us," pleaded Darke—"a tender and delicate girl. Those ruffians are striving to capture her, and it is for her sake that we ask a shelter."

Mabel had followed Bert Otis into the cavern, unseen by him. She now stepped quickly forward, and fell at the old man's feet.

"Have pity on me!" she implored. "I am pursued by villains, and am in sore need of help."

He lowered his light, bent forward, and gazed earnestly in her face.

Then he dropped the string.

"You may stay," he said very softly.

"May the others stay?" she asked.

"They may all stay. I will put this string out of the way before it does danger. You must pardon my rudeness, strangers. I have tried to keep this place a secret. Men know me as Wild Jim, and some call me Crazy Jim; but none of them know my home. But you are welcome for the sake of this sweet child."

He took Mabel's face in both his hands, and tears came into his eyes as he gazed at her.

CHAPTER IX.

MORE TROUBLE FOR MABEL.

"FOLLOW me!" said Wild Jim, as he gave Mabel his arm, and led the way toward the back part of the cavern.

After proceeding a short distance, he turned to the left, and entered a larger and higher apartment, in which were several articles of furniture, a trunk, and many blankets and skins.

"It is damp here," he said. "I am used to it, and don't mind it; but for the sake of this child we must have a fire."

He took wood from a pile in the corner, and soon had a brisk fire burning against the rock, casting a cheerful light into every corner of the cavern.

Supper followed, and then the old man asked David Darke for the particulars of the attack and pursuit of which he had spoken.

The entire story was told to him, and he became almost frantic when the name of Arkansaw Pete was mentioned, uttering the most fearful imprecations against the king of Quartzville.

"Villain is too good a name for that infernal fiend!" he exclaimed. "It was he who ruined my life and made me what I am. I was mining not far from here with my son, as fine a young man as ever lived. We had good luck, he and I, and worked hard, and were fairly prosperous. One day my son took a bag of gold and went to Quartzville to make some purchases. That infernal fiend, known as the Quartzville Boss, had just opened a saloon in the town, and my Ben was persuaded to go there and play. He soon saw that he was being shamefully swindled, and exposed the cheat. That cursed scoundrel at once drew a pistol and shot him dead, and the bullies and loafers of Quartzville upheld him in the cowardly murder."

"It upset me. I was wild for a while, and I now fancy that at times I am not right in my head. But you may judge whether I have cause to hate that wretch. I will be revenged on him yet. I don't know when; but the time is sure to come."

As the fugitives were weary after their oil-some tramp, they made couches of skins and blankets, and laid down to sleep, thankful for Mabel's sake that they had found so good and safe a shelter.

If the scoundrels who had been persecuting them should capture their deserted camp that night, they at least could not descend into the ravine, or make any other attempt to follow them before morning.

Wild Jim was astir at an early hour in the morning, in spite of the darkness of the cavern, and Phil Henning also jumped up, as he had a task in view which he wished to attend to at once.

His purpose was, as he believed Mabel to be safe for the present, to set out and find her father's ranch, intending to return with horses and assistance and take her to her new home.

He explained this purpose to the others.

"It will be a long tramp," he said, "and I can't guess when I will get back."

"You need not make it a tramp," said the old man, who was then on the best of terms with his visitors. "I have two horses concealed down the canyon, and you are welcome to use one or both of them."

The old man also had a general idea of the location of Frank Vintrey's ranch. He directed Phil to keep on down the canyon until he should come to a break caused by the stream that came in from the west. He was to follow up the break, and near its head he would find a trail that would lead him to Vintrey's ranch or to some place where he could get further directions.

He showed Phil where the horses and their

trappings could be found, and the lad took Hank Weir, one of the trainmen, and set out on his journey, leaving Mabel joyful in the hope of soon meeting her father.

In the course of the morning Wild Jim developed a remarkable and almost childlike curiosity concerning his guests.

He asked Mabel her name, her father's full name, her mother's maiden name, and many particulars about her home in the East.

He was equally inquisitive, if not more so, concerning Bert Otis; and David Darke, and Tom Wiley, the remaining trainmen, were put through a similar course of questionings.

Then he turned again to Mabel, whom he could not admire sufficiently, declaring that in his younger days he had seen just such a face, and it seemed that he would never tire of questioning Bert Otis concerning his people in Ohio.

They submitted to this good-humoredly, as to the whim of an old man who was a little "cracked," but had been very kind to them.

"You are a nice pair," he said, and the remark made Mabel blush, while Bert looked not a little confused.

Mabel, on her part, was a little inquisitive.

"Where does the smoke go to?" she asked, looking wonderingly at the fire.

"It finds its way out through a crack in the rock," replied the old man. "Water comes in through the same crack, but it gets out by another crack."

"Are you always alone here, sir?"

"Not quite. There is an Indian boy who stays with me—an outcast from a tribe that used to roam about here. I picked him up when he was starving, and named him Pedro, and he is faithful to me. He has now gone to Chuckaluck for supplies."

"Do you expect to live and die here?" she asked again.

"I am living here, as you see, and I give myself no trouble about where or how I shall die. I feel sure that I will not die until my son's murderer is punished, and that is enough."

All this was rather monotonous to Tom Wiley, who went to the mouth of the cavern early in the afternoon and posted himself where he could look out into the valley.

He had been there but an hour or so when he came running in to his companions with the report that a number of men were coming down the canyon.

"They must be searching for us," exclaimed Mabel. "I am afraid that they may come up here and find us."

"Rest easy, my dear child," replied the old man; "there is no danger of that."

"But they may be attracted by the hole in the rock, as we were," suggested Darke.

"We will soon settle that matter. Come with me."

Close to the opening was a flat stone, which could be easily moved, and which, when placed in position, so nearly filled the hole that it was not at all likely to be noticed from below.

Through the chinks that were left they watched the party that was coming down the canyon—all except Mabel, who shuddered at the thought of seeing her persecutors.

Nobody doubted that the men in the canyon

were Arkansaw Pete's ruffians. They could not be prospectors or hunters, and the leading man walked as if he was following a trail, while the others looked about on both sides, carefully examining every rock and crevice in the canyon.

If there had been any question on this point it would have been settled by the action of the party when they came opposite to the cavern.

They stopped there and looked up at the bluff so keenly that those inside might well be excused for stepping back as if fearful of being discovered.

They were so close, too, that nearly every word they said could be plainly heard by the watchers.

"This is one of the cussedest trails I ever struck," remarked the leader. "Arter nigh breakin' our necks to git down yere, we've got a trail that leads over rocks, and stuns, and don't leave no show."

"Durned if I believe they came this way," said another.

"They did, though. I've picked up a sign yer' and thar; but sometimes I git stumped, ez I am jest now."

"Mebbe they've tuck to the water to hide the trail."

"If they have, we will pick it up arter a bit. Thar's a woman with 'em, and it will be queer if we don't ketch up."

The speaker again looked closely at the bluff, and led the way down the canyon.

Arkansaw Pete was not in the party; Bert Otis was sure of that.

"I am glad of it," said the old man. "I might have been tempted to shoot him down, and that would have given up the secret of this hiding-place."

Toward nightfall the Indian boy, Pedro, came in with supplies from Chuckaluck, and was both surprised and pleased to find strangers in the cavern.

Another night was passed in peace and safety, and the next day Mabel began to look anxiously and impatiently for the return of Phil Henning with her father.

It was near the close of the day when Phil and Hank Weir arrived. They were loaded with provisions, but no person accompanied them.

"What is the matter?" eagerly demanded Mabel. "Did you find the place? Did you see my father?"

"We found the place," slowly replied Phil; "but we did not see your father. He was not at the ranch."

"Where was he? Did you leave word for him? When shall I see him? Will he come here for me, or will you take me to him?"

Phil was in no hurry to answer, and there was a troubled look in his face that made Mabel change color.

"What is the matter?" she again demanded. "There is something wrong, I am sure. Is my father alive?"

"I believe he is."

"You believe he is. Why don't you tell me about him, then? Do you want to kill me, Phil Henning?"

"I am going to tell you. The fact is, Miss Mabel, that your father is in trouble. It is a

bad piece of business, and I must beg you to sit down and be quiet and bear it as well as you can."

"Go on, Phil," she said in a despairing tone.

"I heard it all from Mr. Hersey, his foreman. Your father had a bad dream about you and the train. Indeed, he saw in his dream what really happened. It troubled him so that he mounted his horse, and rode into Quartzville, intending to inquire about you or to go in search of you. He had hardly reached the town when he was arrested on a charge of cattle-stealing."

"Arrested for cattle-stealing? My father?"

"Just so. One of the men employed on the ranch was in Quartzville, and he brought the news to Mr. Hersey. The charge grew out of something that occurred nearly a year ago, and a known thief was the only witness. There is every reason to believe that the arrest was the work of Arkansaw Pete."

"That man again! Why does he pursue us so?"

"No doubt he has a grudge against your father. In fact, Mr. Vintrey charged him with the dirty work, and called him by a name which nobody there had heard before. It was Jim Boyce."

"Jim Boyce!" exclaimed Mabel, starting up. "If that is the man he surely has a grudge against both of us."

"Mr. Hersey thought," continued Phil, "and I believe your friends here will think so, too, that it will be best for you to stay where you are safe for awhile, until—until—something can be done."

"I suppose you are right. Where is my father now?"

"In the Quartzville jail."

"We must get him out of there," said Bert Otis.

"Of course we must," responded David Darke.

CHAPTER X.

TWO INTERVIEWS.

FRANK VINTREY found his imprisonment in Quartzville worse than monotonous.

His anxiety concerning the fate of his daughter and the plottings of the man whom he believed to be the cause of his trouble was extreme, and nearly drove him frantic.

He was guarded like a man who had been convicted of murder, and upon whom the "death-watch" is set. Two armed men were constantly in the room with him and a sentry was stationed at the outer door of the jail.

If he had any friends in that town they were afraid to show their sympathy, or even to go near him. He had endeavored to secure the services of a lawyer, but had been bluntly told by one of his guards that there was no lawyer in Quartzville mean enough to take the side of a cattle thief.

This meant that nobody dared to befriend him.

But he had a visitor before long—no other

than the Quartzville Boss, who turned the guards out of the room, closed the door, and quietly seated himself.

"It is you, then, Jim Boyce!" exclaimed Vintrey. "I thought so. I recognized you as soon as I saw you in that bogus courtroom."

"Between you and me," replied his visitor, "I don't mind admitting that you were right, though Judge Toler would be hard on you if he knew that you had called his court a bogus one."

"I suppose, then, that you are working out an old grudge. How long is this thing to last, and how far do you expect to carry it? You know well enough that I never stole any cattle."

"Do I? The proof was pretty plain, and that seems to me to be a question for a judge and a jury. But I think I have influence enough to get you out of the scrape, if you will agree to my terms."

"Your terms? What are your terms, then? Let me know the extent of your deviltry."

"I don't think it deserves to be called deviltry. You are expecting your daughter on here from the East."

A look of horror came into Frank Vintrey's face.

"My daughter!" he exclaimed. "What have you to do with her?"

"Not as much now as I hope to have hereafter. My proposition is that she shall become my wife."

"Your wife? *Yours?* Do you mean it?" indignantly demanded the ranchman.

"Yes, honestly and fairly."

"As if there was any honesty or fairness about you—you, who ought to be in the Ohio State Prison."

"I suppose I would be there now, Frank Vintrey, if you had your will. You sent me there once."

"Yes, because you robbed me."

"That's what the jury said. But I stayed only a little while in that State Prison. When I got out I hunted up your daughter, whom I had always been fond of. I told her that I had a heavy grudge against you, and offered to wipe it off the slate if she would marry me."

"Really!" sneered Mr. Vintrey.

"Yes I was disposed to be liberal. But she flew at me like a spitfire, called me a thief and a State Prison bird, and all that sort of thing, and vowed that she would not even wipe her foot upon the hand I offered her."

"So that gave you another grudge to settle."

"Just so. I was bound to get even with

both of you, if the chance ever came, and it has come. I straggled out here as Pete Bolger, and got the name of Arkansaw Pete. I don't know why, as I never set foot in Arkansaw, but it has served me well. You see that I am quite willing to give you points of my game. I am now a rich man—rich and powerful—and I make you a fair offer to marry your daughter and call it square on all old grudges."

"I would rather see her in her grave," sternly replied Mr. Vintrey.

"Very well, You can be mulish if you want to, but that won't pay. If you refuse to give her to me, I will have to take her."

"You have already tried that," exclaimed the ranchman.

"What do you mean?"

"You tried it the other night when you attacked the camp where she was, at the head of a gang of scoundrels disguised as Indians, and killed her uncle."

Arkansaw Pete turned pale, and stared at the speaker.

"How do you know that?" he demanded.

"She can't have got to your ranch so soon, nor could you have heard from her, if she had got there. Who told you that story?"

"It is enough that I know it," replied Mr. Vintrey, perceiving that he had scored a hit, and rightly judging that Arkansaw Pete had not yet succeeded in capturing Mabel. "You missed your stroke that time, and you had better not try any more rascally games, as the day of reckoning is sure to come."

"You are talking foolishness, Frank Vintrey," said the other, who was again calm and cool. "Don't you know that I am the King of Quartzville? I run this town, and am monarch of all I survey. You will be hung for cattle-stealing, if I say the word, or I can break up your business, and ruin you."

"And you propose to go straight ahead with your deviltry unless you marry my daughter?"

"That is about the size of it."

"Do your worst, then! You shall never even look at her if I can help it."

"You will be sorry for this, Frank Vintrey," said the King of Quartzville, as he rose to go. "As you refuse a fair offer, I shall take my own way of getting what I want."

He called the guards, and went out, leaving the prisoner in a very uncomfortable frame of mind.

At about the same time, an event of some interest was taking place at the Gold Brick Saloon.

Dan Gilligan, the barkeeper, was alone and lonesome. It was two or three hours since he had seen a customer, and he had

exhausted all his expedients for passing the time.

"I'm gittin' durned tired of this," he muttered. "A feller might as well be in jail as shut up here; and it don't look like goin' straight, nohow, to stand in with sech a set as Arkansaw Pete and his gang. Though I ain't crooked, I'm mixed up with a crooked crowd. Reckon the best thing for me will be to leak out and float away. Hello! here comes somebody at last."

A tall and swarthy man entered the shanty, and stepped up to the bar.

At the sight of him Dan Gilligan's eyes opened wide, and a broad smile spread over his face.

"Blest if it ain't Mr. Darke!" he exclaimed.

The stranger also recognized the barkeeper, and held out his hand.

"Why, Dan Gilligan! I am glad to see you. I had never thought of seeing you out here."

"Nor I you, sir. It is all-fired lonesome here," he said, "and I was just thinkin' about quittin' this place and floatin' off. When any folks do come in, it is a bad crowd."

"I hope you haven't gone wrong again, Dan," remarked David Darke.

"Not a bit of it, sir. When you got me out of that bad scrape at the East I promised you that I would never go crooked again, and I have kept my word. But this place belongs to Arkansaw Pete, and the wu'st of his crowd come here, and it is bad enough to serve out drinks to that sort and know too much of their goin's on."

"I suppose you know considerable about their performances," said Darke, musingly. "By the way, Dan, you are just the man I want to help me in a certain matter, if I can get you."

"Help you, sir? I help you? If I can do that, it is the best news I have heard for many a day. You can depend on Dan Gilligan, Mr. Darke, to the last drop of blood in his body."

"But in this affair, Dan, you would have to go dead against Arkansaw Pete."

"All the better for that. He is a hard rock to run ag'inst; but I am ready enough to break with him and his gang. What's the biz, Mr. Darke?"

"In the first place, there is something about a wagon-train from the East, and a girl, and an attack by white men disguised as Indians. Perhaps you have heard of it."

"Heard of it? I know all about it. It was fixed up in this room, and they started from here."

"Dan, that girl is a particular friend of a particular friend of mine, and he and I helped to fight off those scoundrels."

"Thunderation! If I'd known that, wouldn't I ha' put a spider in their dumplin'? But they didn't git her."

"No, and she is safe for the present. It is her father who is in trouble now. Arkansaw Pete has had him arrested on a false charge of cattle-stealing, and locked up in a Quartzville jail."

"I know about that, too, Mr. Darke. When I heard that the girl's father had been locked up, I put this and that together, and 'twas easy to guess that 'twas on her account. Everybody knows that Mr. Vintrey is a square man, and the cuss who swore ag'inst him is meaner'n a coyote. Arkansaw Pete is up to such games, and that one disgusted me so that I am keen to quit. What are you going to do about it, sir?"

"My friend and I have come here for the purpose of getting Mr. Vintrey out of that jail, and you can help us if you will."

"You can bet on me, Mr. Darke, and I am likely to be able to do as much as either of you."

"When can you get off from here, Dan?"

"Right now. I am goin' to leave this whisky-mill, and never see the inside of it again."

Dan Gilligan put on his coat, took his revolver and cartridges, and stepped behind the bar.

"It almost seems as if I ought to clean out the money drawer," he remarked.

"No, Dan. Don't give anybody such a hold on you as that. Come on, if you are ready. I want you to show us where to hide our horses, and as you are going with us we'll need another horse."

"All right, sir. There's a splendid crittur here that a man named Sam Spurl left."

Dan locked the saloon on the outside, and put the key under the step, and on the unpainted door he scrawled these words:

"This Bare is Shot Up."

CHAPTER XI.

ESCAPE AND DISASTER.

It was night, and late at night; but sleep and silence had not extensively settled down upon the stirring town of Quartzville. The real life of the place did not begin until after dark, when the miners and cowboys flocked in for dissipation and excitement.

The Quartzville jail was not in what may be called the "business" part of the town. It was within hailing distance of the glaring lights of its drinking-saloons and gambling-houses, but was comparatively secluded and solitary.

The sentry who was stationed in front of the door sighed as he paced his beat with his

rifle on his shoulder, and occasionally looked longingly at the lights which spoke to him of jolly crowds.

It would be so much better to be there, he thought, than guarding a gloomy jail.

The only animate object that could interest him about there was a large and handsome dog, which came trotting up the street, stopped in front of the jail, took a good look at it, and went on.

"Splendid dog that," remarked the man.

In a few minutes the dog came trotting back, went nearer to the jail, passed around it, returned, took another look at the building, and seemed inclined to remain in the vicinity.

"Wonder what that dog is hangin' around here for," said the sentry. "Wish I owned that dog. Never saw him in Quartzville afore. Maybe I can coax him up and ketch him."

He tried various blandishments such as are supposed to prevail with dogs; but this one, though he wagged his tail and did not appear to be unfriendly, kept well out of the reach of his perfidious flatterer.

The attention of the sentry was then attracted to a young man who came walking down the street and approached the jail.

A warning hail brought him to a halt.

"Why, don't you know me, Bill Quaid?" he asked.

The sentry lowered his rifle.

"It's Dan Gilligan," said he, "Glad to see you, my boy. How's the Gold Brick, and what are you doin' yer' at this time of night?"

"The Brick is all right, Bill, and I am here on biz."

"Queer sort of biz it must be."

"Not very. The boss sent me to 'dentify the prisoner in there—to see if I know him, so's I can be a witness ag'inst him."

"The boss," was one of the titles of Arkansaw Pete, and Bill Quaid respected it accordingly. As Dan was a barkeeper for "the boss," his word was sufficient.

"That's all right, Dan," said Quaid. "I say, Dan, as you are a barkeeper, you might have a bit of whisky handy."

Dan produced a bottle, and the sentry took a hasty swig.

"I shall have to lock you in," he said, as he opened the door. "Knock when you want to come out."

Gilligan went at once to the room in which Mr. Vintrey was confined.

That gentleman lay on a rude bed, with his clothes on, apparently asleep. The two guards were nodding on chairs against the wall.

All of them, including the prisoner, started up when Gilligan entered, and the guards

expressed both pleasure and surprise at seeing him there.

"The Boss told me to come and 'dentify the prisoner here," replied Dan.

"I wonder now, Danny," said a guard, "if you've got a bit of the Gold Brick about you, lyin' around loose in your pockets or tied up in anythin'."

"I've got a bit of it wrapped up in glass-ware," he answered, as he produced his bottle. "Bill Quaid outside took a turn at it, and you are welcome to what is left if you want it. Reckon you find it right tiresome here, boys."

"Mighty slow," said one of the guards, as he raised the bottle to his lips.

"Hold on, Sam!" cried the other, as the contents of the bottle disappeared rapidly.

Sam smacked his lips as he passed the whisky.

"My gullet was nigh growed together," he said; "but that opened it up right quick. Seems, though, it has a sorter queer taste. Don't you think so, Bill?"

"Mebbe it does taste a leetle pecooliar," replied the other; "but I'm too human a critter to ever find fault with whisky."

Though business had brought Dan Gilligan to the jail, he seemed to be in no hurry to attend to it. He did not proceed to "dentify the prisoner," nor did he even look at him, but entered into a chatty conversation with the two guards, who soon finished the bottle.

After a while they began to yawn, stretch their hands, rub their eyes, and show in various ways that drowsiness was overpowering them.

Dan watched them, "slowing up" in his talk, until Sam fell from his seat to the floor, and lay there.

The other, who was not quite so far gone, roused himself, and stared at Dan with sleepy eyes.

"W'ot's er matter?" he drowsily asked. "Hev yer been a-p'isonin' of us?"

"Not a bit of it, Bill," answered Dan.

"Then it's some durned hocus."

Bill rose from his seat, and Dan rose at the same time.

The young man passed his arm around the body of the guard, tripped him, and laid him gently on the floor, where he was soon quiet enough.

"What does this mean?" demanded Mr. Vintrey, as Gilligan turned and faced him.

"It means, sir, that your friends have come to take you out of this place. Follow me, and step up lively."

Mr. Vintrey, nearly overcome by joy and surprise, at once followed his deliverer to the front door, at which Dan gave three distinct raps.

In the mean time a somewhat different scene had been acted outside.

The sentry, though he had not drank heavily of Dan's "doctored" whisky, found himself growing drowsy, and paced his beat more rapidly to keep awake. But his drowsiness increased.

"Reckon I'll have to take a chaw o' ter-backer," he said.

Placing his rifle against the door, he went down into his pockets for a plug of tobacco and a knife, and helped himself liberally.

As he turned to get his rifle he was startled by a savage growl, and saw the big dog which he had coveted facing him, and showing a dangerous set of teeth.

He reached again for the rifle, and the dog made a fiercer demonstration.

"Seems like that dog don't want me to touch that gun," he said. "Wonder if he really means it?"

A few feints toward the rifle convinced him that the dog really did mean it.

"Maybe he's mad," muttered the drowsy sentry. "Reckon a pistol bullet will fix him, anyhow."

But, as he moved his hand toward his pistol belt, the dog darted forward, as if ready to spring at his throat.

"He won't have that, either," said Bill Quaid. "Looks like I'm treed. Queer dog that. I may as well sit down a bit, and maybe he'll go away."

He sat down and fell into a doze, and a man stepped from the shadow of a building and watched him.

The sentry awoke in a start.

"There's that cussed dog yet," he muttered. "Reckon I'll have to holler for help. I feel powerful sleepy, somehow. Don't know what's got into me."

Three raps on the door within startled him, and he staggered to his feet.

"All right Dan," he said, as he felt in his pocket for the key.

At that instant two men rushed swiftly and silently from the two sides of the house, seized him, and bound and gagged him before he could utter a cry.

"Quiet, now, Rip!" said the younger of the two, as he pulled out the key and opened the jail door.

Dan Gilligan emerged, followed by Mr. Vintrey.

"Who are you, and what does this mean?" asked that gentleman.

"We are friends of your daughter, sir, and have come to take you to her," replied Bert Otis. "Please hurry, sir, as there is not a bit of time to lose."

A glance at the two men assured Mr. Vintrey that they did not belong to Arkansaw

Pete's crowd, and he followed them without further question.

They had to run about a hundred yards to a hollow, where their horses were concealed.

As they crossed the road they heard shouts at a little distance.

As they emerged from the hollow and mounted, they heard the clattering of hoofs coming from the direction of Quartzville.

"They are after us," said Dan. "Quick work that. Follow me now. I know the short cuts, and can give those cusses the slip."

Dan took the lead, and struck off into the hills at the north, soon reaching a ravine which seemed to be impassable in the darkness. But he pushed his horse into it, skillfully winding his way among the obstructions, followed closely by the others in single file.

Before reaching the head of this ravine, he turned sharply to the left, ascended a wooded ridge, and kept along its summit for a little distance. Then he descended to another ravine, which was traversed with comparative ease, and finally brought the party out in what may be called their own canyon.

Their pursuers were nowhere in sight or hearing, nor had anything been seen or heard of them since leaving the first ravine.

"We did give 'em the slip," said Dan, as the party came to a halt. "They must ha' headed nor'west, while we have been goin' about nor'east. We are all right now. But—hello—one, two, three—*whar's the fourth man?*"

CHAPTER XII.

PHIL AS A FORLORN HOPE.

ALL looked about in amazement, and perceived for the first time that Bert Otis was not with them!

The night was so dark, and all had been so closely occupied in picking their way and following their leader, that they had not thought of each other, and the absence of Otis was a blow quite unlooked for.

"He may have struggled behind," suggested Darke. "Let us wait here a while, and he may come up."

They waited, but he did not come up, and a sense of calamity settled down upon them heavily.

"When did you see him last, Mr. Darke?" asked Dan Gilligan.

"I have not seen him since we struck the ravine where we had such rough work. You were in the lead, Mr. Vintrey next, I was third, and Bert brought up the rear. He was well able to take care of himself, and I never thought of looking after him."

"Each of us had as much as he could do to look after himself, and that's a fact."

"What do you suppose has become of him?"

"Well, sir, I reckon he has either lost his way, or his horse has tumbled, or they've got him."

"That last thought is terrible, Dan. I am going back to look for him."

"No you won't, sir, beggin' your pardon for plain speakin'. You would be sure to lose your way, and the chances are that you would git picked up by the Quartzville crowd."

"I can't bear to go on without him, Dan."

"But you've got it to do, sir. Nothin' can be done to-night. I couldn't begin to foller our track back, myself. We must trust to luck and to-morrer. I hope the young gentleman has only lost his way, and will show up afore long."

David Darke was convinced against his will, and rode on with the others, sadly and silently.

After a while he roused himself, and satisfied Mr. Vintrey's curiosity by telling that gentleman who he and his friend were, and how they had happened to join John Hackett's train. He then gave a full account of their subsequent adventures, down to the expedition to Quartzville.

"It is to you brave fellows, then," said Mr. Vintrey, "that I owe the safety of my daughter, and my own liberty, if not my life. And now one of you, I am afraid, is in yet greater danger than I was in, and on my account. He shall be saved, if it is possible to save him. The ranchmen about here will make common cause against the scoundrels who run the town of Quartzville. They are bound to do it. They have been plundered and bulldozed too long. I will start out in the morning and get them together."

That was all very well, David Darke sadly reflected; but it would take time, and in the meanwhile what would become of poor Bert Otis?

The party reached Wild Jim's hiding-place before morning, and the meeting between Mr. Vintrey and his daughter was a joyful one.

Mabel's delight was unbounded. She not only saw her father for the first time after a long separation, but he had just been rescued from a great danger.

She kissed David Darke's hand and covered it with tears.

"But what is the matter?" she asked, observing his sad face and downcast eyes. "Has anything happened? Where—where is your friend? Where is Bert?"

"He is lost!"

"Lost? Then those villains have caught him. How could you lose him? Merciful Heaven! this is terrible. We are no sooner clear of one trouble than another comes. They will kill him, Mr. Darke. They will murder him. They will use him horribly. Father, can nothing be done to save him?"

"I will do all I can," replied Mr. Vintrey. "I am going to set out as soon as possible to raise the ranchmen, and I think they will be ready enough to fight. But, as Mr. Darke says, that will take time."

"He must be saved!" cried Mabel. "If he is killed, it will break my heart."

"But, Mabel, my dear child, everything that is possible shall be done."

Something must be done quickly," said David Darke. "I will set out at daylight, and will ride to Quartzville. I will save my friend, or will perish with him."

Phil Henning stepped forward, and laid his hand on Darke's arm.

"That is hardly the right way to talk, sir," said he. "We have no lives to throw away to please these scoundrels. You had better leave that job to me, Mr. Darke."

"If you want to go with me, Phil, I will be glad to have your company."

"That's not what I said, sir. I think I had better go alone. You are pretty well tired out, and I am fresh. Some people in Quartzville might recognize you, and it is not at all likely that anybody there knows my face. Two would be of no more use than one in that crowd, and they might get in each other's way. You all know me, friends, and I hope you can trust me, though I am a young chap."

It was clear enough that all were disposed to trust him to the fullest extent, and David Darke was finally persuaded to allow Phil to undertake the enterprise alone, especially as Mabel expressed the greatest confidence in the youth, and declared that no person could do more to save Otis than he could.

Phil proceeded to disguise himself to some extent, not that he feared he might be recognized, but because he wished to present such an appearance as would satisfy the ordinary Quartzville rounder.

With the aid of some of Wild Jim's old rags, a liberal supply of dirt, and a smashed hat, he transformed himself into such a loafer as might well pass muster in Quartzville, and before daylight he was ready to start.

"I shall want the best horse I can get," he said.

"Take mine," said Dan Gilligan. "It is the boss crittur. I am goin' to ride part of the way with you and try to cover the ground we passed over last night; but it won't be safe for me to go to Quartzville."

Phil left the cavern, followed by the tearful prayers of Mabel and the best wishes of all.

Dan accompanied him the greater part of the distance, following as near as he could the route he had taken in the night, but they saw no trace of Bert Otis.

Within a mile or so of Quartzville Dan pressed his companion's hand, wishing him good luck, and the daring young fellow went alone.

CHAPTER XIII.

QUARTZVILLE LAW.

DAN GILLIGAN had given it as his opinion that Bert Otis had lost his way, or his horse had fallen, or he had been captured,

Two of these contingencies had occurred.

Riding in the rear of his party, he had discovered, shortly after they entered the first ravine, that his horse was lame.

He would not for a moment think of preventing or retarding the escape of his friends, so he made no mention to them of this misfortune, though he feared that he would not be able to keep up with them.

This fear soon became a certainty. The lameness of his horse increased, and he lost sight of those ahead of him. At the same time he could hear the pursuers coming on rapidly.

He was about to abandon his horse and trust to his feet and the darkness, when the animal suddenly stumbled and fell, throwing his rider over his head.

Bert was stunned by the fall, and when he recovered his senses he found himself a prisoner in the hands of two men, who, as he could not doubt, belonged to Arkansaw Pete's gang.

"So you've come around, my gay galoot," said one of them. "I was beginnin' to be afeard that we mought miss the fun of hangin' yer."

Bert felt for his pistol, but of course it was gone.

"Hope ye didn't think we was green enough to take any chances on yer," chuckled his captor. "Not much. We hain't had a hangin' bee in Quartzville now for quite a while. Come along, sonny, and don't try no tricks."

Bert was mounted behind one of his captors, around whose waist his arms were passed, and his wrists were securely tied. The other brought up the rear, leading the lame horse, which was pronounced "wu'th savin'."

The captive understood from their talk, as they went along, that the rest of the Quartzville horsemen had gone on in pursuit of the

fugitives, leaving him in charge of the two men who had the poorest horses.

The journey to Quartzville was a slow and tedious one, and was peculiarly unpleasant to Bert; but the procession at last reached the town, and the prisoner was consigned to the jail, the door of which he had left open with the key in it.

Both the drugged guards had been taken away, with the bound and gagged sentry at the door, and Bert and the two men who had brought him there were the only occupants of the prison.

His prospect was far from a cheering one; but he had reason to hope that his friends had got away safely, and in that there was much consolation.

There was no use in fretting. If it came to the worst, he would meet his fate like a man, and why should he worry about what he could not help?

With this reflection he laid down on the rude bed, and was soon sound asleep.

Early in the morning one of his captors brought him a hot and substantial breakfast.

"Ez I allow to go an' see yer hung to-day," said the man, "I ort to pay su'thin' fur the sight; so I've brought yer some first-class grub."

It was quite a good breakfast for Quartzville, and Bert ate it heartily and enjoyed it thoroughly.

At about nine o'clock he was taken into town by a strong guard, and was soon surrounded by a crowd of rough-looking men, who eyed him maliciously, and made remarks upon his personal appearance that were intended to be severely sarcastic.

It was clear to him that he would find no friends in Quartzville.

Well, he had not expected to find any.

He was taken into the office of "Judge" Toler, but not for the purpose of a legal examination by or before that magistrate.

Arkansaw Pete had returned from the pursuit of the fugitives, as one of his followers expressed it, "chuck full of cuss." He was fearfully angry because he had lost them, and determined to vent his wrath upon the one prisoner who had fallen into his hands.

He said, and caused his words to be repeated on the street, that a man who would help a cattle-thief to break jail was worse than a cattle-thief, and hanging was too good for him. If outside galoots were to walk into the Quartzville jail and walk off with its prisoners, there was no use talking about law and justice any more. An example was needed, and the prisoner was a fitting example, especially as he and his partners had poisoned the guards in the jail, so that at one time they were not expected to live. The course of the law was too slow and uncertain

for such an offender, and nothing but a lynch court could be relied on to do justice speedily and surely.

This was the substance of the Quartzville Boss's arguments, as repeated in various forms by his followers, and the result was that when Bert Otis was taken into Toler's office he found everything arranged there for the execution of lynch law.

A burly ruffian sat in Toler's seat as the representative of Judge Lynch, and twelve "rounders," who looked as if they deserved hanging, occupied a bench as a jury.

The respectable people of Quartzville kept aloof from Arkansaw Pete and all his proceedings as much as they could, satisfied if they were left alone.

Where was Bert's dog Rip while his master was in trouble?

When Bert was captured, a pistol-shot that grazed his skin had forced Rip to seek a place of safety; but he soon returned, and followed the prisoner and his captors to Quartzville.

He stayed near the jail until Bert was brought out in the morning, and then followed the crowd into town, but at a safe distance, as he recognized them as enemies, and did not care to scrape acquaintance with any of them.

Not far from Toler's office he was accosted by a rough-looking young man on horseback, who did not seem to belong to the crowd.

"Hello, Rip!" said this person, as he dismounted and hitched his horse.

The dog recognized the voice, if not the face, of Phil Henning, to whom he had taken a great fancy in the cavern, and went up to him, wagging his tail.

"Keep off, sir!" ordered Phil. "You are a suspicious character in Quartzville. I say, old boy, you must look out for yourself. You may stay around here, but keep your eyes peeled."

Rip moved away, as if he understood what was said to him, and Phil went into Toler's office, and pushed forward to a front place, just as Bert Otis was arraigned before Judge Lynch.

"Is this a legal court?" demanded the prisoner. "If it is, I have a right to a lawyer and to challenge the jury."

"It is a good enough court for you, young feller," replied the ruffian who presided, "and the jury is made of squar' men, chose from the citizens of Quartzville. You are charged with breakin' the jail and runnin' off a cattle-thief. What have you to say ag'in' it?"

"If this is a lynch court I suppose you have the business all cut and dried, and it would be useless for me to say anything."

But I have not broken any jail, and have not run off any cattle-thief."

"Let the witness come forrard!"

One of the guards related how he and his partner had been dosed with drugged liquor; but he said that it was Dan Gilligan who had done that trick, and admitted that he had not seen the prisoner.

There was evidence enough against Bert, however. The man who had acted as sentry at the jail door had retained his senses sufficiently to recognise the prisoner as one of the two who pounced upon him and bound and gagged him.

A man who had been walking near the jail testified that he witnessed the scene at the door, and saw four men run away from the jail. He at once gave the alarm, which was answered by some mounted men who were coming down the street.

Bert's captors testified that they were of the party that pursued the four men, and that they caught the hindmost of them, who was the prisoner.

Arkansaw Pete then stepped forward, bestowing upon the prisoner a look of triumphant malice, which Bert returned with a scornful glance.

The King of Quartzville said that he was one of the pursuing party, and that he had recognized the prisoner among the fugitives. He also knew him as a liar and a bad and dangerous character.

He proceeded to make a short speech, declaring the necessity of making an example of somebody, for the purpose of terrifying the cattle-thieves, their aiders and abettors.

At this the jury, some of whom knew quite as much about cattle-stealing as anybody, looked very solemn, if not very virtuous.

"It is a clear case," said the ruffian who occupied Toler's seat. "The jury will settle it now inside of five minutes."

The jury retired into a corner, and Bert Otis stood up and looked around the room.

In the front of the crowd he saw the young man who had spoken to Rip outside, and he thought that he recognized him.

A scarcely perceptible wink told him that he was right. Yes, it was Phil Henning.

It was a consolation to Bert to know that one friend was near; but of what possible use could that friend be to him?

Phil would at least be able to report to his friends that he met his fate bravely.

The jury retired to their place, and one of them stepped forward to report their finding.

"The jury say that the prisoner is guilty, and must be hung right off!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A HANGING BEE.

THE verdict of the packed jury excited no surprise. The proceedings had been ordered by the supreme authority, and there was nothing for them to do but hang the prisoner, if they had felt inclined to do anything else.

Bert was asked, only as a matter of politeness, what he had to say for himself.

"It is late in the day to speak of that," he replied, "since I have been condemned without a chance to say anything or defend myself. Wouldn't it be better to hang me first, and then ask questions?"

"This ain't no jokin' matter, young feller," said the Judge Lynch of the occasion. "If you have got any thing to say, spit it out."

"There is much that I might say, if there was any use in saying it. But I see that neither law nor justice is to be had here. If any of the respectable citizens of Quartzville were present—"

The speaker was interrupted by a howl of indignation from the mob, who rushed upon him, hustled him about severely, pinioned him, and dragged him into the street.

There a procession was formed, headed by the man who had acted as judge, and the jury surrounded the prisoner, while the "citizens at large" joined in and straggled along as they pleased.

A rope had been already prepared, and was carried conspicuously before the eyes of the victim.

The business men of Quartzville kept within doors and had nothing to say. It would be well for them if the excitement of the hanging should not result in a general row and the gutting of some of their establishments.

Phil Henning, who had ways of his own of ingratiating himself with the rough element, mounted his horse and rode on with the rest. He was the only man in the crowd who was not afoot. Rip skirmished about the edges.

The procession halted at the edge of a bluff about half a mile from the town, where a stout branch of a large tree extended over the road.

It was a capital tree for hanging purposes, and had more than once been utilized in that way.

The prisoner was stationed under the branch, with the rope around his neck. He was pale, but his look was still proud and defiant.

But it was a hard thing to die when he was full of youth and hope, and yet harder to meet such an ignominious death, at the hands of such a scoundrelly crew.

He looked for Phil Henning.

There stood Phil in the front of the crowd, chewing a straw with an air of utter unconcern.

A man was about to climb the tree with the end of the rope.

"I say, boss," remarked Phil, "s'posin' we put the cuss on a hoss, and drive the hoss out from under him. That's how we do it up Chuckaluck way, and it's a mighty good game."

Phil had made several friends in the crowd, and his appearance commended him to the rest, as he had "all the symptoms" of a hard case. So his suggestion was received with favor.

"Whar's a hoss?" inquired the late Judge Lynch.

"Take mine," replied Phil. "I'll fetch him."

He brought his horse in through the crowd, and ranged him under the branch at the side of the prisoner.

A large and handsome dog quietly followed him, but attracted little attention, owing to the interest that was taken in the preparations for the hanging.

"Lift the cuss up," said Phil, "and one of you take the rope up the tree."

"Ain't you afeard your hoss'll run away when he scoots out?" asked one.

"I kin ketch him. Never mind the hoss. Anythin' to make the fun lively."

The prisoner was lifted on the horse, and a man began to climb the tree. Phil stood at the bridle, and it did not need his quick glance to assure Bert Otis that he meditated some desperate deed.

Rip stood near, watching him attentively.

"Ist!" came sharply from beneath Phil's closed teeth.

Rip dashed at the crowd like a mad-dog, snapping and biting in all directions, and scattering them so that they tumbled over each other.

As quick as thought Phil jerked the noose from Bert Otis's neck, stepped forward, and cut the cord that bound the prisoner's hands with a sharp knife he had concealed in his sleeve. Almost at the same moment he drove the knife into the horse's haunch.

With a snort of pain and fright the animal dashed away at the top of his speed.

Phil burst through the thinnest part of the crowd, and leaped over the bluff.

The attack of the dog had so disconcerted the lynchers that this sudden change of scene paralyzed them for the moment.

At first it was not easy to shoot the dog without hitting each other; but when they had scattered he was made a target of, and was quickly riddled with bullets.

But Rip was not yet dead when his master

escaped, and Bert was swiftly passing out of range when rifles and pistols were brought to bear upon him.

As soon as his arms were freed he had seized the bridle-rein, and he drove his heels, from which the spurs had not been removed, into the sides of the terrified animal, increasing his speed.

None of the hasty shots that were fired struck the flying mark, and Bert was soon out of reach of his enemies, among whom there was not a horse for pursuit.

Others of the lynchers turned their attention to Phil Henning, though his sudden action and bold leap caused them to lose several valuable seconds of time.

The bluff at that point was some thirty feet high, and at its base lay a piece of bottom land, covered with trees.

Phil had not leaped blindly, or without due precaution. He had looked over the edge of the bluff, fully considered his course, and settled on the exact locality where it would be safest to jump off.

He alighted on the soft turf, springing as he touched it, and thus saving himself from a fall, while at the same time he increased the distance between himself and the lynchers.

He then ran on at the best of his speed, choosing a course at right angles to the bluff, as that gave him the best chance to get out of range of the rifles that were beginning to rain bullets about him.

Fortunately the bottom at that point was heavily timbered, and the fugitive dodged about among the trees aiming to keep as many of them as possible between himself and his foes, and giving them a poor opportunity to prove their skill as marksmen.

Every step he took added to his chances, and in a very short time he felt himself safe from the bullets of those on the bluff.

But a hasty glance backward had shown him a number of men scrambling down the bluff, with the evident intention of following him on foot.

With Bert Otis all was plain sailing.

He was free, he knew his route, and he had a good horse under him, while the enemies from whom he had escaped had none. He had nothing to do but to ride right on and rejoin the friends who were perhaps mourning him as dead.

Only one thing troubled him, but that was enough—what had become of Phil Henning?

He had thought of that when the style of escape planned by Phil was suddenly made plain to him; but he would have been powerless then to refuse the aid that was offered or to stop his friend's self-sacrificing effort. The work had been done so quickly that he

was off and away before he fully comprehended what had happened.

But he hoped, and had reason to hope, that the young guide, who had shown himself so daring, active and ready of resource, had left a way open for his own escape.

Bert was compelled to admit that he could not imagine what that way was, but in the hope that there was such a way he rode on at leisure when he was convinced that he was beyond pursuit.

He was right in supposing that he was mourned as dead by his friends in the cavern.

None of them had any hope of seeing him alive again, with the exception of Mabel, who believed largely in the skill and courage and devotion of her friend Phil.

The gloomy looks and despondent tones of the others scarcely shook her confidence, and she prevented David Darke from setting out on a forlorn and hopeless quest by assuring him that Bert would soon return, and all would be right.

Every now and then she took her station at the mouth of the cavern and looked down the canyon, that she might be the first to announce the arrival of the lost one.

At length she ran in clapping her hands excitedly, and almost in hysterics.

"Somebody is coming up this way!" she cried, and ran back as fast as she had come.

"I suppose it is Phil Henning," muttered Darke, as he went to join her at the opening.

But he had not reached that place when he was startled by her joyful cry.

"It is Bert! It is Bert! He is safe! Thank God!"

And she covered her face to hide her fast-flowing tears of joy.

Dave hastened down to meet his friend, took care of his horse, and brought him up to the cavern, where he received the warmest welcome possible.

In response to eager inquiries he briefly told the story of his capture, sentence and escape.

"What has become of Phil, then?" demanded Mabel, when he had hardly finished.

"I don't know," sadly replied Bert. "He is a wonderfully smart and daring young fellow, and I hope that he had a plan laid which would get him safely away from that gang; but I can't guess what sort of a plan it could have been, or what has become of him."

"This is dreadful!" exclaimed Mabel. "No sooner is one of us saved from a terrible danger than another is caught in a trap. When will we get clear of our troubles?"

She declared that she would be quite happy if she could only know that Phil was

safe; but there was no happiness for her while his fate was in doubt.

So felt the others, and Bert Otis was the most uneasy of all, and the rest of the day was dismal enough.

Darkness had settled down upon the canyon, when a faint hail was heard outside, and Darke and Otis hastened to the mouth of the cavern.

"Who is there?" demanded Dave.

"Is that you, Mr. Darke?" answered the well-known voice of Phil Henning. "Please come and help me to get up there. I am played out."

CHAPTER XV.

THE RANCHMEN'S CAMPAIGN.

IF Phil Henning had had any doubt of the estimation in which he was held by his friends, it would have been dispelled by the warmth of his reception.

He was made as comfortable as possible, and was given the best the cavern afforded to eat and drink, and questions and congratulations were showered upon him.

But he was too tired and footsore and lame to give more than a very brief account of his escape.

"After I jumped the bluff," he said, "I ran my best, and was soon pretty safe among the trees. I was not a bit worried when they came down and ran after me, as I knew what my legs were worth.

"But when I had passed the creek and crossed the bottom I ran against another bluff, and I knew it would never do to turn to the right or left, as they would be sure to cut me off. So there was nothing for it but to climb the bluff, and that was a mighty tough scramble, I can tell you, and the bullets struck too darned close to me before I reached the top.

"When I had got up there I felt safe enough, and stopped to rest a bit. Then I only had to be careful not to break my neck or lose my way, and I am a pretty good hand to strike the right course and keep it.

"I aimed for the break in this canyon that took me to Mr. Vintrey's ranch, and found it, but nearly broke my leg in falling into a gully, and it was as much as I could do to get here."

"We are all very thankful for your safety," said Mabel. "I was saying awhile ago that it seemed that whenever one of us was saved from danger another was sure to get into trouble. But it is a great blessing that you have come back to us."

"There is one of us gone, though," replied Phil.

"Who is that? We are all here, except my father. Has anything happened to him?"

"Not that I know of. It is a four-footed

fellow that I speak of. Mr. Otis's splendid dog, who made the fight that saved his master, had no chance in that crowd. They must have closed in on him and filled him full of lead in next to no time."

"My dear, brave dog!" exclaimed Bert, as the tears came into his eyes.

"Well, my friend," said Phil, "he did the best kind of work, and made a glorious die of it. Let me sleep now, and I will be all right in the morning."

Nothing had been heard from Mr. Vintrey, who had left the cavern directly after Phil started to Quartzville; but he had not been idle.

He perceived the supreme necessity of combining the ranchmen for their own protection, and it was his business that day to see as many of them as possible, and induce them to rise in rebellion against the King of Quartzville.

He found most of them ready enough to be persuaded. Under the rule of Gold Brick's Boss, Quartzville had become a rendezvous for cattle-thieves and all sorts of marauders, and its reputation in that respect was daily growing worse.

The ranchmen, whose herds of cattle were really the wealth of the district, were compelled to seek more distant and inconvenient points for their supplies. They had suffered from depredations until they were tired of being plundered, and the outrages reported by Frank Vintrey gave them to understand that the rule of the rascals might be forcibly impressed upon their homes and families unless they should combine to break it.

The only difficulty lay in the large amount of country that had to be covered in order to bring them together; but Frank Vintrey rode fast, and sent Stephen Hersey to some places, and hurried the most influential of his recruits off to other points, so that a good deal of work was done in the course of the day.

At an early hour a reliable man was sent into Quartzville to sound the business men there, and learn if they would support the outsiders in an effort to rid the town of the ruffians who ruled it.

It was supposed that if Arkansaw Pete intended to carry on the war he had begun, he would strike a blow at Frank Vintrey's ranch, and that place was appointed as the rendezvous of the gathering clans.

Before night numbers of ranchmen and cowboys had come in, and had begun to fortify the ground about the house. Others arrived during the night, and among them came the agent who had been sent to Quartzville. He reported that the respectable citizens of that town were anxious to be emancipated from the rule of the roughs, and

would gladly co-operate with the outsiders if an attack should be made.

The ranchmen then considered themselves strong enough to assume the offensive, and a forward movement was ordered for the next day.

At an early hour the next morning Frank Vintrey appeared at Wild Jim's hiding-place.

He had ridden down three horses and had scarcely taken a cat's nap since he began his task; but he seemed to be still fresh and hearty, and fit for anything.

When he had welcomed and congratulated Bert Otis and Phil, he told of what he had done, and of the preparations that had been made to clean out Arkansaw Pete and his gang.

"It is an infernal shame," he said, "that I don't dare to take my daughter to my own house, and that she is forced to hide like a rabbit in a hole. But she is safe here, I believe, and we will soon change the style of things. If any of you young men want to go with us to strike those scoundrels, you are welcome to do so; but I don't press it on you."

They all volunteered, and set out with Mr. Vintrey to join the force that was moving on Quartzville.

When the ranchmen and cowboys were united, and were joined by these welcome allies, they were seen to be a formidable band of good fighters, and it was believed that they would be abundantly able to do the work they had set out to do, if the assistance of people in the town was to be depended on.

So they rode forward confidently, dividing into squads and choosing officers as they went.

But they were still more than a mile from Quartzville when they were met by a man from the town with bad news.

Their purpose was known, he said, and the roughs were ready for them.

One of the business men who had been trusted with the secret of the expected attack, doubtless wishing to curry favor with Arkansaw Pete, had told him of the movement and explained its object and plan. The result was that the King of Quartzville and his gang had ordered all the peaceable citizens to shut up their houses and remain within doors under penalty of being shot on sight, and had even taken possession of some of the more substantial buildings for defensive purposes.

This bad news caused the leaders of the ranchmen's party to hold a conference, and it was unanimously agreed that since they had gone so far it would never do to back out. If they should retreat without a fight, Arkansaw Pete and his followers would be

encouraged to commit greater outrages, and the decent people would be correspondingly dispirited.

The messenger from Quartzville suggested that in case of failure, the people of that town would be treated more roughly than ever.

"We can't help that," replied Frank Vintrey. "If those Quartzville folks are too cowardly to strike a blow for themselves, they deserve to be sat down on. Come on, boys! We will give those rats a shaking, anyhow!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A DRAWN BATTLE.

WHEN the ranchmen's party reached Quartzville, the truth of the information that had been conveyed to them was made evident.

Quartzville was as silent and apparently as empty as a dead town. The main street was deserted, the business houses were closed, and even the drinking-saloons and gambling places were as quiet as death.

There could be no doubt that the roughs were concealed in the houses, ready to open fire on the invaders from their shelter, as soon as they should fairly enter the town.

This state of affairs called for consideration, and the ranchmen held a consultation, at which it was decided to enter and clean out every house as they reached it, on both sides of the main street. Thus they would leave no enemies on their flanks, and might finally force their foes to an open fight.

The plan worked very well for awhile, and was carried forward easy enough, the houses that were entered being either deserted or occupied by peaceable people.

It was not until the assailants had nearly reached the center of the town that the trouble began.

A saloon that was broken into contained several armed men, and a brief fight began at that point.

The men in the saloon were soon overpowered, part of them making their escape by the back door; but the battle had then become general, and from windows and doors along the street there came a hail of bullets.

To make matters worse, several of the roughs tumbled boxes and bales out of a store, making a barricade from which they could sweep the street with their fire.

The attacking party soon began to believe that they were getting more than they had bargained for, and were forced to adopt the tactics of their adversaries and seek shelter.

Then was presented the curious spectacle of a street fight, in which most of the combatants were within doors, and a cross-fire

was kept up from each side of the street, while the men behind the boxes and bales made it unsafe for any person to show his face outside.

This kind of warfare was not very sanguinary; but there were a number of lesser combats about the houses, in which blood was shed freely.

Phil Henning distinguished himself by sneaking around and entering the rear of the store, in front of which was the troublesome barricade.

Passing unobserved to the front, he rapidly emptied a revolver among the men who were concealed there, and ran back to his friends without receiving a scratch.

Several of the cowboys—rough and reckless fellows, who cared nothing for orders or discipline—mounted their horses and galloped up the street, firing right and left as they went, and repeating the bravado as they returned; but this produced no visible effect, except a loss of men and horses, and the ambition of the cowboys was discouraged.

While this skirmishing fight lasted, the forces of the ranchmen were making no progress. In fact, they were rather losing ground.

The Quartzville crew had so greatly the advantage of position, and were so well acquainted with all the ins and outs of the town, that they were more than equal to their assailants, man for man.

It seemed too, as Frank Vintrey afterward said, as if all the cattle-thieves and cut-throats and marauders and roughs of all sorts in that whole region had been emptied into Quartzville.

Under the circumstances the best thing for the attacking party to do was to back out, and the signal for retreat was given.

The retreat was conducted cautiously, as much as possible under cover, and in good order, though the retiring party were subjected to a galling fire, which they returned with spirit.

The last person hit on their side was Dan Gilligan, who had shown splendid courage all through the fight.

A rifle bullet struck him in the breast as he faced the enemy, and he fell backward!

David Darke and Bert Otis, who were near him, picked him up and carried him out of range.

"Let me down," he said, faintly. "I'm a goner."

They knew well enough when they laid him on the grass that he had but a moment to live.

David Darke held his head, and Bert knelt at his side.

"It's all right, Mr. Darke," he said, as he gasped for breath. "I'm dyin' honest."

Yes, he died honest. He had gone far to the bad in his early days, and had since had a hard struggle to be honest, and it was surely a consolation to him to feel that he died honest.

David Darke insisted upon placing Dan's body on his horse, for the purpose of taking it away and giving it a proper burial.

The retreating party halted to "take account of stock," as their antagonists seemed to be in no humor for pursuing them.

Several good men were missing, but they had the consolation of knowing that they had left none of the wounded to fall into the hands of their foes.

"We missed it that time," said Steve Hersey, as he shook his fist at Quartzville; "but it is do or die with us now, and when we strike again we will hit hard. The boss fight of this range is yet to come off."

The defeated party spent the night at Frank Vintrey's ranch, guarding the house and discussing plans for the future. They were not at all inclined to be jolly, and could not see their way clearly to clean out the Quartzville desperadoes, though they were convinced that the work must be done.

But during the night they received unexpected reinforcements.

Men from Quartzville came dropping in, at first by ones and twos, and then in squads.

They reported that they had been terrorized by Arkansaw Pete into taking no part in the recent struggle, but had reason to bitterly repent their inaction.

To use their own words, hell had broke loose in Quartzville.

The attacking party had hardly got out of sight when the roughs "took the town." The saloons were thrown open, and a scene of the wildest debauch ensued.

Stores and houses belonging to those who were most obnoxious to the ruling party were entered and plundered; some citizens were severely beaten, and others were compelled to fly for their lives.

When they reached the camp at Vintrey's ranch they were not only willing but anxious to fight their oppressors.

Before morning the army was considered strong enough to capture and occupy Quartzville; but it was decided that the men should have a good rest, and that the next attack should be timed so as to take the roughs when they were recovering from the effects of their spree.

Under the circumstances Mr. Vintrey believed that it would be entirely safe for him to bring his daughter home, and at an early hour in the morning he set out for Wild Jim's cavern, accompanied by Darke, Otis, Phil Henning, and two other good men.

They took a straight course to the break

that led to the big ravine, and followed it down to the canyon, up which they rode briskly, rejoicing in the prospect of a speedy termination of their troubles.

The sun was about four hours high when they reached the locality of the cavern, and they halted and looked up at the bluff for the hole in the rock.

There was no hole in the rock to be seen!

They stared at each other in surprise and consternation, and looked about to make sure that they were at the right place.

"What is the matter?" demanded Mr. Vintrey, in a hoarse and broken voice. "Surely we have not lost our way?"

They dismounted and examined the locality more carefully.

After noticing that there were fragments of rock at the foot of the bluff which had not been there before, they climbed up and discovered that the entrance to the cavern was filled with similar and larger masses of freshly broken rock.

"Merciful heaven!" exclaimed Mr. Vintrey, "what has happened now?"

CHAPTER XVII.

WRECKING THE CAVERN.

THERE was one of the Quartzville Boss's followers who was not engaged in the Quartzville battle. This was Blue Tophet, otherwise known, because of his prowling and sneaking propensities, as Coyote Bob.

Although not noted for bravery, he was one of the most trusted aids of the King of Quartzville, and could always be depended on when there was any dirty work to be done.

He was away on one of his prowling expeditions when the big fight occurred, and did not return until the warriors were exhausting themselves in a vain endeavor to kill all the whisky in Quartzville.

On any other occasion Blue Tophet would at once have begun to "even up" with the others by pouring into himself suddenly as much liquor as any of them had drank; but now he had an important matter to attend to, and the seductive beverage was untouched.

He sought Arkansaw Pete, and demanded a private interview, which was at once accorded.

"It's about that gal, boss," he remarked, and "the Boss" was all attention.

"The gal you was arter, you know, whose camp we struck one night up on the plain."

"Yes, I understand."

"Mebbe it mought be wu'th suthin' to you to find the gal now."

"Yes, it would."

"If I kin tell you whar to find her, boss, so's you kin git her, w'ot'll you gimme?"

"Fifty dollars."

"Double it!"

"I will double it as soon as I get her."

"All right. It's a sure thing. She is hid in a canyon not many miles away. I was comin' down the canyon, and see'd her peekin' outer a hole in the rock. I sneaked off and hurried to you with the news. I reckon she's alone; but if thar's anybody with her, it'll be an easy job to smoke 'em out or shut 'em up."

"I will take a party and strike for her right away, and you must go with us, Blue, to show us the place."

The King of Quartzville took half a dozen mounted men picked from among the soberest of his followers, and including Blue Tophet, and set out for the canyon.

It was late at night when they started, and the journey in the darkness was so difficult and slow that it was broad daylight when they drew near to Wild Jim's cavern.

"Thar's the gal ag'in!" exclaimed Blue Tophet, pointing ahead.

Arkansaw Pete also saw her, and the party pressed forward until they reached the cavern.

"Thar's the hole," said the guide. "The rabbit's inside, and all you've got to do is to haul her out."

All dismounted, and Blue Tophet was left to hold the horses while the others went up to reconnoiter.

It seemed to be an easy affair enough. There was the hole, the girl was inside, and there seemed to be nothing to oppose their entrance. But she might have friends with her, who could make it hot for the invaders, and it was well to be cautious.

The leader was in no hurry to expose his person to a possible bullet from within, but one of his reckless followers crawled into the opening without stopping to consider the point.

"It's all right," said the man. "Come along!"

Arkansaw Pete pushed his big body through the hole, and found himself in a cavern where he could stand upright.

The next moment he was confronted by an old man with white hair and beard, who held a light in his left hand,

He was at the right place, for it was no other than Mabel Vintrey whom the guide had pointed out from the canyon below.

She had watched the departure of her father and friends the previous morning with many misgivings, because she knew that they were going to fight, and feared that some of them might not return to her.

It might be her father who would not return, or it might be Bert Otis. On these two her thoughts were fixed, and she prayed earnestly that they might be safely delivered

from the difficulties and dangers that beset them there.

The old man did his best to make her comfortable and entertain her, and Pedro, the Indian boy, was always ready to humor her slightest whim; but she was sorely troubled, and occupied herself during the entire day in going to and from the mouth of the cavern to watch for the return of her friends.

The day closed, and the night came on, and still they had not arrived; and her anxiety increased to such an extent that she passed a nearly sleepless night.

Early in the morning she was up and out at the entrance, still looking for those who, as she feared, might never return.

Soon she came running back to her companions, with a look of fear on her face that startled them.

"There are some men riding up the canyon," she exclaimed in tones of terror, "and I am sure that they are not our people."

"Stay here, my child," said the old man, "and I will soon see who and what they are."

When he returned, his face was paler than usual, and wore a look of settled determination.

"You are right," he said. "Those men are not our friends. They are Arkansaw Pete and some of his gang, and I believe they are coming here."

"Now I am indeed lost!" despairingly exclaimed Mabel. "They have killed my father and all my friends, and are coming here for me. They must not be allowed to get in. Have we no guns or pistols? I can shoot if I must. We can kill them as they try to enter, and we must kill them! We must!"

"Calm yourself, my child," said the old man. "Leave the business to me, and all will be well. Take this, and fasten it securely upon your person."

He took from his breast a bag of deerskin, tightly sewed up and gave it to her.

"Take care of this," he said, "and give it to your friend, Albert Otis."

"Are you going to leave us?" she asked.

"What do you mean to do?"

"I am not going to leave you. I have waited long for that man and now he has come. Leave him to me. You shall suffer no harm. Go into the corner there with Pedro. Hurry, now, as I must go and meet him."

She shrunk away into a corner feeling that some fearful event was about to occur, and seated herself close to Pedro, as if there might be safety even in the presence of the poor Indian boy.

The old man hastened into the other part

of the cabin, and Mabel could hear every word that was spoken there.

"Who are you, my friends, and what do you want?" he asked, as he confronted the invaders.

"We are seeking a lost girl," replied the leader, "and we understand that she has taken refuge here."

"There is indeed a young woman here," the old man admitted, "and she may be the one you seek. She had some friends, but they left her."

"That is the girl."

"I hope you mean well by her."

("Is it possible he means to give me up?" whispered Mabel to Pedro.)

"Of course we do," replied Arkansaw Pete.

"Then I am glad to see you. Call in your friends. Come in, all of you. You are welcome to my poor abode, and to the best of food and drink it affords."

"Too much talk, old man. Where is the girl?"

"You shall see her directly. She can't get away. You shall have some hot breakfast, too. Let me see—are you not Arkansaw Pete?"

"Men call me so."

"I am glad to see you—very glad to see you. I have long desired this honor, and now I am thankful for it. My name is James Otis. I had a son, Ben Otis, a very likely young fellow, who was enticed into your gambling-den shortly after you came to Quartzville, and was persuaded to play there. He accused you of cheating, and you shot him dead, murdered him in cold blood. At last you have put yourself in my power, and have given me a chance to settle that account."

"What do you mean, old man?" demanded the Quartzville Boss.

("He is going to blow up the rock," whispered Pedro to Mabel, as he threw a blanket over her head.)

"I mean that your time has come!" solemnly replied Wild Jim.

He pulled a cord that he held in his right hand.

There was a terrible shock, followed by a heavy roar, and the crash of rending rock.

The sides and roof of the cavern fell in, and the space was choked up with masses of shattered rock, in which no sign of life was visible.

The other part of the cavern was untouched, but was filled with smoke and dust and a sickening odor. Not until this had partly subsided did the Indian boy permit Mabel to remove the blanket from her head.

She took a light, and went to see what ruin had been wrought.

One glance was sufficient, and she fell on the rock in a swoon.

When she came to herself she was lying on a pile of blankets, with the Indian boy at her side.

"We can get out," he said. "We can pull away the rock and leave this place."

He at once set at work to make a passage, and Mabel went to help him.

Blue Tophet, holding the horses on the outside, was aware that a fearful disaster had occurred, and was not long in ascertaining its nature and extent.

When he perceived that his comrades would never return to him, he began to consider his own interests.

"I don't take these yere hosses back to Quartzville," he muttered, as he mounted his animal and led the others up the canyon.

CHAPTER XVIII

CONCLUSION.

"THE old man must have blown up the cavern," said Phil Henning, as he stared at the mass of broken rock.

"Then my daughter is dead," declared Mr. Vintrey.

"Perhaps not," replied Bert Otis. "I think the rock was loaded only near the mouth of the cavern."

He scrambled up to where the entrance had been, and called Mabel at the top of his voice.

She answered with a joyful cry.

"Is that you, Bert?" she asked.

"Yes; I am here with your father and friends. Are you hurt?"

"No. Pedro and I are trying to work our way out."

"Don't worry about that. We will soon clear a way to you."

The six men outside set to work with a will, taking turns at pulling out the broken rock and throwing it down to the base of the bluff.

In a short time they had so far cleared out the entrance that Mabel could see the light of day and easily hear the voices of her friends.

She told what had happened, as far as she knew it, and vividly described the scene between Wild Jim and the Quartzville Boss.

Soon the workers began to uncover the crushed bodies of men, and the last one they found was recognized as that of the redoubtable King of Quartzville, who had been in advance of his comrades when the crash occurred.

As Bert Otis conjectured, the rock of the cavern had been charged only in the outer apartment near the entrance, and the other

portions had not been damaged by the explosion.

Whether Wild Jim had intended to bury himself in the same ruin with his enemies, could not be known with certainty; but their fate had been his, and he was found covered by broken rock, though not so heavily as the others.

The task of clearing a way into the cavern was laborious and tedious; but it was finally accomplished, and Mabel and the Indian boy were brought down into the canyon.

She was overjoyed at meeting her father and friends, and listened with the deepest interest to the thrilling account of their attack and repulse at Quartzville.

"But that horrid man is dead now," she said, "and I hope we will not have any more trouble."

"I believe we will not," replied her father, "and we must hurry home and inform our friends of what has happened."

It was late in the day when they reached the camp at the Vintrey ranch, where they found the friends of law and order greatly excited over their absence, and wondering what had become of them.

Their arrival was a great relief, and the story they had to tell put all in a good humor.

"The boss fight of the range will not come off this time, after all," remarked Steve Hersey.

It did not come off. The news of the death of Arkansaw Pete found its way to Quartzville, and when the little army marched into town the next day they met with no opposition.

The worst of the scoundrels had taken timely warning and decamped, and those who were left were ready to offer their submission and accept such terms as were imposed upon them by the committee which was chosen to reorganize the affairs of Quartzville.

At her father's ranch Mabel Vintrey gave Bert Otis the bag of deerskin which had been handed to her by Wild Jim, and they opened it together.

It contained several papers, one of which proved to be "the last will and testament of James Otis, formerly of Ohio," bequeathing all the property of which he died possessed, to his "dear nephew, Albert Otis." Another paper gave directions for finding a quantity of gold which the old man had concealed in his cavern.

Bert went with a party to the canyon, where he buried the body of his uncle, and dug up the concealed treasure.

Its value was about ten thousand dollars—not a large fortune by any means, but sufficient to give the young man a good start on

a ranch. As it was soon settled that he was to marry Mabel Vintrey, this windfall came in quite opportunely.

David Darke took up his residence in Quartzville, where he became an enterprising and respected man of business.

The Indian boy, Pedro, found a home with Bert and Mabel, and he could not have asked for a better one.

Phil Henning was rewarded in more ways than one for what he had done and undergone, and resumed his active life on the plains.

THE END.

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